

GUNTRAP TRAIL

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There was nothing but sagebrush and cactus on Old Abe Meade's spread, yet the wily old ranch-owner persistently refused to allow the mining company to run a railroad through his lands. Some of the citizens of Sand Wells felt that Abe should be forced, by mob violence if necessary, to give way and finally someone decided that a dose of lead poison would be the answer—except they mistook their target and killed Stanley Burke.

This was the situation as Steve Morton (known as the Dark Knight and The Robin Hood of the West) found it and he decided that it was time he took the matter in hand.

GUNTRAP TRAIL

A Dark Knight Story

By

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"Oklahoma Gunsong"

"The Jorrum Creek Gang"

etc.



LONDON

W. FOULSHAM & CO. LTD.

NEW YORK : TORONTO : CAPE TOWN : SYDNEY

First published in Great Britain 1915

CHAPTER ONE

STEVE MORTON was surprised at the unusual activity which went on all around him. It was not Saturday, but the town of Sand Wells was crowded and busy. Morton put up his big hammer-head roan horse at Bert Kilgore's livery barn for a good feed and grooming and made his way on foot along the main street. In spite of the throngs on the board and flagstone walks he had no difficulty in walking. People unconsciously stepped out of the way of this tall and broad-shouldered man in range attire.

There was something about the level gaze of the blue eyes, the firmness of the strong, ruggedly handsome face, the quiet air of assurance which brought an instinctive feeling of respect in the minds of those who encountered Steve Morton. A certain air about him was a subtle warning that this stranger might prove a good friend or a dangerous enemy.

He made his way through the crowd with the firm step of one who knew exactly where he was going and why. Yet Morton had no particular business in Sand Wells beyond the purpose of picking up a few trail supplies and getting a haircut. This latter item he needed pretty badly. His black hair was shaggy around his ears and curling in a becomingly ragged mat on the nape of his neck. Despite the fact he was clean-shaven, there was something about his appearance which suggested he had seen little of civilization during the past weeks, perhaps months. Yet he did not look like a rider of the owlhoot trails.

While he wore a pair of matched Colts in well-oiled holsters, he wore them without ostentation. They were as much a part of the man as were his scuffed cowboy boots, grey Stetson, dark blue flannel shirt, and worn levis.

Steve Morton, cowboy, was a drifter who looked like a U.S. deputy marshal. Which would have amused him, had he realized it, for Morton was far from being any sort of an official. In fact there had been many times when he had been

considered quite a thorn in the side of certain minions of the law. Headed eastward toward Texas, he wasn't looking for so much as a temporary job. Certainly, he didn't expect to find it here.

Sand Wells was a railroad and cattle town. Thus, Morton was faintly surprised to see so large a percentage of desert freighters in the crowd. It puzzled him until he saw the black-painted sign above the one-storied building across the street from the barber shop. A sign which read:

GODDARD BORAX MINING COMPANY

Henry Maxwell, Mgr.

There was a congested knot of men clustered around the front of this establishment—freighting men, cattlemen, and quite a few town citizens. They were crowding around to read a bulletin being pasted to the front window by a florid-faced man in khaki engineer outfit complete to laced boots and stiff-brimmed Stetson hat. From the comments of the crowd Morton gathered that they were not exactly pleased. Curious, the dark-haired drifter halted at the fringe of the gathering to listen.

"So Abe Meade refused the mining company a railroad right-of-way," growled one man to his neighbour. "Might of knowed the old buzzard would do that."

"I don't savvy it, Lem," said the second man, obviously a cowboy. "I thought Goddard was going to take it up with the territory governor to condemn a strip of Meade's land for a spur line. Wouldn't hurt Meade's place none. Nothing but sagebrush and cactus on the old Anchor spread, anyhow."

"They did start government action on the strip through Eagle Pass but Meade blocked that quick by filing on that gold claim of his in the pass. Old man Anderson would turn over his grave if he knowed Meade found the gold that Anderson always said was there."

"He spent a heap of time and money trying to find it before he sold off that land to Meade. Nobody ever did understand that deal, did they?"

"I never did," replied Lem. "Don't reckon young John Anderson ever did either. You oughta know, Joe Blake. You ride for him."

"You think there was something crooked about that deal, Nolan?" asked a third man curiously.

"Nobody knows but the two principals, Mr. Trench," answered Lem Nolan, glancing casually at the listening Morton. "Anderson's dead, and Meade won't tell."

"Shucks!" snorted Joe Blake. "Why can't the mining company build their spur line around Meade's land then?"

"Because Eagle Pass is the only good way out of the desert in this direction. They'd have to build fifteen miles of extra track to do it. With twenty miles here to Sand Wells to join the main line, that'd be thirty-five miles. And it's only thirty miles north from the mines to the railroad junction at Cedar."

"I reckon Sand Wells is going to lose the mining freight business," said Joe Blake with a sigh.

"Excuse me, gents," said Morton, in his low, drawling voice, "but just what is the argument?"

All three men silently studied him for a moment, instantly a bit wary of a stranger and, then, as he smiled, they relaxed. There was something about him that made them feel he was one of their own kind.

"Stranger, there ain't no argument," said Lem Nolan. "It's just plain cantankerous polecat. Know where Dutchman's Desert is?"

"Not exactly," said Morton. "It's somewhere north of here, isn't it?"

"Twenty miles. The Goddard outfit mines borax there and freights it by wagon down through Eagle Pass to the railroad here at Sand Wells," said Nolan. "They want to build a spur line, but Abe Meade won't let 'em have a right-of-way. He's getting rich charging toll on the freight wagons coming across his land."

"Shut up, Lem," said Joe Blake suddenly. "Maxwell's going to say something."

The florid-faced man turned to face the ring of angry men around him. Morton, Nolan, Blake and Trench moved in closer as a hush swept over the crowd.

"Well, this is the latest ruling, men, on our proposed spur railroad," Henry Maxwell said, and while he scarcely seemed to raise his voice his words carried clearly to everyone present. "Everybody south of Abraham Meade—from John Anderson to Faro Thorpe, who owns the freight-yard site here in town—

has given a reasonable option to the mining company on a right-of-way. We thought we had Meade whipped by getting the governor to condemn a strip of land through Eagle Pass, but Meade stopped that by filing on a gold claim in the pass."

"What difference does that make, Mr. Maxwell?" demanded a burly freighter. "Eagle Pass is plenty wide enough. A thirty-foot strip for a railroad right-of-way wouldn't hurt Meade's mining operations none. The freight wagons are using the pass trail right along."

Maxwell shoved back his hat in an exasperated gesture. It was obvious that the mining company manager was not an overly patient man.

"True enough, Higgs," he answered the freighter," but we have a contract with Meade for wagon traffic at fifty cents per load. The railroad wouldn't be hurt, but the condemnation of the land is blocked. We shall now have to force Meade to sell directly to the company or make a deal of some sort. We can't proceed with legal action."

"What are you going to do?" demanded Lem Nolan loudly.

"Go back to work on Meade," said Maxwell grimly. "Failing that, we'll have to build our spare line to Cedar, after all."

"What! And Sand Wells will lose the borax business—the big plant you were going to build here, and all that?" protested Sam Trench, tugging at his walrus moustache. "As the owner of the local hotel I protest. It will be bad for my business too. Is that actually what you intend to do, Maxwell?"

"I'm afraid so, Trench," said Maxwell.

"Heck! That ain't fair," declared Joe Blake angrily. "One man being able to block progress that means a lot to the whole town."

"No, it isn't fair," agreed the hotel owner. "I think the citizens ought to do something about this."

Steve Morton glanced around as angry murmurs came from the other men in the crowd. He was aware that it would take very little to incite those around him into mob violence. At such times anything might happen, and he felt that perhaps Abe Meade might also have good reasons for his actions.

"There's just one thing you fellers seem to be overlooking," he said. "This Abe Meade gent actually owns the land under discussion. You can't use violence."

Abruptly the men around him were glaring at him, anger and resentment in their gaze. It was obvious they objected to this tall stranger hotning into local affairs. What right had he to tell them what they could or couldn't do? Morton felt like an animal trainer trying to sooth a pack of lions and tigers by gentle words.

"Can't use violence, eh? That's what you think!" said Trench hotly. "I'm going to call a meeting of business men and ranchers." The hotel owner looked Morton over from head to foot. "Say, who are you, anyhow?"

"The name is Steve Morton," replied quietly. "And you're right, Mr. Trench. I'm a stranger, and have no business telling you and the rest of your friends how to run things." His smile was friendly. "I was just pointing out the obvious facts."

"Unhuh," said Joe Blake impatiently. "When we need a pointer we'll buy us a bird-dog. Might be a smart thing for you to mind your own business, Morton."

There was a murmur of agreement to the cowboy's words from some of the other men in the crowd, but their attitude toward the stranger was far less hostile than it had been at first.

"Wait a minute, men," said Maxwell quickly, glancing keenly at Morton. "This man's right. You folks better leave this matter to Goddard. We appreciate your interest and support, but the company can fight its own battles. There's more than one way to handle the situation."

There was a babble of comment at this. Maxwell quickly rushed it up and urged the crowd to disperse. They broke up in knots of twos and threes, indignantly discussing the situation. Morton shrugged and started across the dusty street toward the barber shop.

Local politics. He could read the set-up as far as he could smell it. The pattern never changed, because human nature didn't. Only the bone of contention varied. In this case, it was the right-of-way through a man's property. The mining company was trying to get it for nothing, and the owner was trying to hold them up for an exorbitant price. Neither was right and neither was wrong. It was just one of those things. Change the prize for cattle, or water, or grass, or range rights, and he had seen a hundred such situations in a hundred localities of the growing West.

At least, there was no outlawry in this Sand Wells affair, no crookedness, no oppression, no miscarriage of justice—which in the estimation of Steve Morton was decidedly refreshing. There wasn't even a land-greedy banker foreclosing on somebody's old homestead. Distinctly it was none of Morton's business.

"Hey there, stranger!"

Morton halted and turned his head to see the manager of the borax mining company beckoning to him. The other men who had been in front of the office had all drifted away. Morton retraced his steps, perfectly aware that the mining man was keenly sizing him up. He had already done the same thing for Maxwell, seeing in the other man a resourceful individual with sharp grey eyes and a jutting jaw which hinted that their owner could also be a bit ruthless when the occasion demanded. It was apparent that Henry Maxwell didn't hold his job because he was a relative of the Goddard family.

"I'd like to talk to you for a few moments," said Maxwell as Morton reached the front of the office. "You said your name was Morton. Maxwell is mine."

"So I gathered." Morton glanced up at the painted sign.

"Come on into the office," invited Maxwell.

His attitude noncommittal, Morton followed the mining company manager into his private office. It was nicely, though not elaborately furnished with a flat top desk, files, an iron safe, and straight back wooden chairs. Maxwell closed the door and went to the chair behind the desk.

"Sit down, Marshal," he said heartily.

"Morton's the name," corrected Morton calmly as he took a chair.

"Yes, I know," was the cool resort. "I didn't mean just that."

"You think I'm a lawman," said Morton.

"Aren't you?" Maxwell said as directly.

"Nope—not exactly," Morton replied, smiling faintly. "Maybe my being curious about other folks business makes them think that."

"I see," commented Maxwell in a tone which plainly said that he did not. There was frank disbelief in his voice. As Morton said nothing he went on. "Just passing through, eh?"

"That's right."

"Where from?"

"West," answered Morton pleasantly.

"Where are you heading? If you don't mind my asking."

"East. If you don't mind my answers."

"Ummm—you wouldn't be interested in riding north would you?"

"I hadn't figured on it."

"I don't suppose you'd be interested in a good job, either," remarked Maxwell in faint irony, somewhat nettled.

"Not especially," drawled Morton. "Why?"

Maxwell considered his visitor for a moment, frowning. Then he relaxed and smiled. Morton just sat waiting, his strong, ruggedly handsome face expressionless, but he was quite at ease.

"Frankly, here's the situation," Maxwell said. "You heard some of it outside. The Goddard outfit is developing a good borax mine in Dutchman's Desert about twenty miles north of here. Sand Wells is our logical railroad outlet. But a dry rancher by the name of Meade owns a long and wide strip of land adjoining the desert. In fact, we've having boundary trouble with the old coyote. He claims his property runs out and laps over desert land filed on by the company. To keep his stringy cattle off our property, we had to erect a fence. Meade moved the fence out to enclose a couple of water holes we need at the mine. One thing's brought on another, and—"

"Not to mention the wagon freighting contract," interposed Morton dryly.

"Yes, not to mention that. That's another deal, but Meade can't welsh on that until the present contract expires next year."

"At which time," added Morton, "you'll have your tail caught in a crack—unless you can make some deal with Meade in the meanwhile."

"Well, baldly—yes," admitted Maxwell, compressing his lips. "The only alternative would be to open a new trail route to Cedar, on the northern line, and that's out of the question. Say, you're pretty shrewd for a drifting cowpuncher."

"Oh, I just sorta have a knack of sizing up a situation," said Morton. "No offence meant. Just how does all this tailor down to fit me?"

Maxwell pursed his lips, reflecting earnestly while his sharp grey eyes bore into Morton's blue ones, then he plunged.

"The Goddard Company isn't a 'small outfit,'" he said. "We draw enough water for the territorial governor to likely send an investigator here to consider our claims. Now if a stranger by the name of Morton was just casually looking around, I'd be a fool if I didn't arrange it for him to see matters in a fair and square light, Goddard hasn't anything to hide. All we want is an equitable settlement on a right-of-way. It's going to cost plenty of money to build that spur line, you know."

"And if a feller by the name of Morton didn't happen to be interested in investigation?" prompted Morton.

Maxwell's eyes narrowed and his lips tightened. He spoke tersely:

"Then I might need a first-class gun toter on my pay-roll to handle the trouble brewing with Abraham Meade. We've got to get that right-of-way! I pay good wages—in certain cases," he finished significantly.

Deliberately Morton got to his feet and stretched.

"Thanks for your confidence, Mr. Maxwell," he said gravely, "but I'm not your man. I'll be trailing east before sundown."

Maxwell looked somewhat taken aback. Recovering, he grunted and stood up. "I guess I'm not as smart as I thought I was at pegging men. If you change your mind, you'll find me here or at the hotel."

"Thanks," acknowledged Morton, and walked out.

CHAPTER TWO

SOBERLY Steve Morton crossed the street, reflecting on what he had learned. Then he shrugged his wide shoulders in dismissal of the entire business. If he took sides at all in this matter it would certainly not be for a rich mining corporation. And it didn't look as though the wily old Abe Meade deserved—or needed—any help.

The sound of a hammer made Morton look up before he reached the barber shop. He was crossing before an open gateway in a high board fence. Glancing beyond, he saw that the fenced yard adjoined a sturdy frame building across the false front of which was painted the sign:

SAND WELLS FUNERAL PARLOR
ALSO CARPENTRY

Ebenezzar Snodgrass, Prop.

Morton smiled at the incongruity of the sign and then peered in through the gateway of the yard. At the mouth of a wide doorway in the side of the building, a threshold the height of a wagon bed and to which there was only a narrow flight of steps at one end, a pine box reposed across a pair of sawhorses. A stocky baldheaded man wearing a carpenter's apron was busily putting the finishing touches to the long box.

On impulse, Morton entered the yard. At once he became aware of a row of small tombstones propped up against the wall of the house. In the back of the yard, under a shed, were two vehicles—a buggy and a hearse. Sounds and smell of horses came from a barn on the far side of the yard. There was lumber piled up in a couple of racks, and general evidence of wood-working industry.

Morton approached the gaping doorway and ascended the narrow steps. The carpenter finished driving a nail before he looked up. And then Morton stared into the saddest face he had ever seen. The baldheaded man was about sixty, short and fat. His body was built for jolly laughter. But his moye-

ments were solemn and his face, which should have been that of a happy cherub, was lugubrious.

"Howdy, sir," he said in a mournful singsong voice. "What can I do for you today?"

Morton almost stumbled over a small headstone which stood just inside the doorway at the head of the steps. He moved around it and glanced at the nearly completed coffin. Beyond, on the opposite side of the doorway, was a half-finished child's crib. Morton's eyebrows lifted a trifle.

"You're Mr. Snodgrass, I take it," he said.

"That I be—Ebenezzar Snodgrass, at your service," responded the old man in his mournful singsong that had a nasally plaintive tone.

"I'll bet you sang tenor in the choir in your youth," said Morton.

"High tenor," agreed Mr. Snodgrass in his queer voice.

"A man of many talents," said Morton gravely, keeping his face straight. "Stonemason, carpenter, and undertaker. A crib and a coffin. You sorta cover the subject from the cradle to the grave."

"I help out the barber next door on Saturday afternoon," said Snodgrass, picking up a piece of beading and preparing to tack it on the coffin for trim.

"Today seems like Saturday—judging from the crowds," observed Morton.

"Pay day yestiddy at the borax mine," said Snodgrass, and went on with his tacking job.

Morton waited silently until this was done. He was beginning to like this tragic little old troll in whom there wasn't a spark of humour.

"Now then," said Snodgrass, laying his hammer down on the top of the coffin. "What was it you wanted, friend?"

Morton opened his lips to admit that he was not in the market for anything this side of the barber shop when his eyes fell on the headstone marker near the steps and the words remained unspoken. From this angle he could see the newly cut inscription. His eyes widened a trifle as he read:

ABRAHAM MEADE

The Texas Hellion

Born 1831

Died——

Snodgrass was not aware of anything out of the ordinary. He contemplated Morton owlshly.

"You're a stranger," he said. "Don't recall ever seeing you in Sand Wells."

The younger man recovered himself and looked down at the fat little undertaker's round face.

"That's right, Mr. Snodgrass, and I don't reckon I need anything but a little information. My name's Morton. Seems to me that I've heard of this Abraham Meade. When did he die? You haven't cut the last date of that marker."

"Eh? Oh! Meade ain't dead so far as I know."

"Then he was rather provident in ordering his tombstone ahead of time."

"Nope. Seldom comes to Sand Wells," intoned Snodgrass sadly.

"Then what—" Morton broke off, somewhat at a loss.

"The marker and the coffin go together," supplied the undertaker. "Special order."

"What? Is this a joke?"

"Not for a hundred and twenty-five dollars, paid in advance. I sell lots in the town cemetery, too."

"But who ordered this coffin?" demanded Morton.

"John Anderson—last week."

"John Anderson?"

"Neighbour to Meade. His PDQ spread lies just south of Meade's place. Anderson's father used to own both outfits before he sold the Old Anchor to Meade."

Morton leaned against the corner of the doorway, got out the tobacco and cigarette papers and began rolling himself a smoke.

"Look, Mr. Snodgrass," he said gently, "folks don't go around ordering coffins for other people who ain't dead. That sort of solicitude ain't welcome, and it might lead a feller into a peck of trouble."

"Don't reckon you mean me."

"Of course not. I was thinking of this John Anderson jigger."

"Knew you couldn't mean me," went on the undertaker, squatting slightly to blow some sawdust off the coffin top. "Nothing illegal in what I do. Anderson paid for the work, and when a man pays Ebenezzer Snodgrass he gets just what

he wants. I'll cut an obituary-date in that stone when John gives it to me. None of my business what name he wants carved—Abraham Meade, Abraham Lincoln, or the king of China. It strikes me you're a mighty curious gent, Morton."

"I am," Morton admitted coolly. "And I'm right curious about John Anderson."

"Nothing curious about John except he drinks and gambles too much, letting his ranch go to pot. Take hold of that end of the coffin and help me set it up against yonder wall."

Morton silently obliged. Puffing and blowing from the exertion, Snodgrass continued the conversation as they lugged the box to the designated spot.

"John's kinda wild when he gets to drinking. Has a deep grudge against Meade which only comes out when he gets his skin full of red-eye. Swears he'll kill Abe Meade some day, and anyone who knows John Anderson is plumb certain he's man enough to do it."

"Does that take courage?" asked Morton. "Anybody can pull a trigger."

"Not against Abe Meade. That old man is a ring-tailed wampus cat from Texas. One of the best shots in New Mexico. Came to this country as a prospector. Funny thing about that. He spent nigh onto five years prospecting the Old Anchor spread for gold for George Anderson. Got the old man so deep in debt to him that Anderson had to split his place in half and deed the north section to Meade to pay off."

"Now, after he couldn't find gold for Anderson in five years time, Meade suddenly strikes gold—after he owns the land. That's why young Johnny Anderson hates him. He thinks Meade swindled his Dad. He figures that gold mine belongs to the Anderson family. Nobody around here blames him much. Since the spread was divided, Anderson's half has been going steadily downhill. And now this gold mine business. I wouldn't like it myself, and I'm a Christian man. Would you like it?"

"Probably not," said Morton, though he felt that if John Anderson was young and healthy, he was accepting defeat far too quickly. "I take it that Abe Meade is not a very popular man."

"Popular?" snorted Snodgrass. "There wouldn't be three mourners if I was to put him in that box tomorrow. When he

drives his steers in for shipment he expects cattle cars ahead of everybody else. He wants the best room at the hotel. He demands a private poker room at Faro Thorpe's place. At the dance palace he insisted that Belle Howard entertain only him. I must say he sure is a Texas hellion. John Anderson was right when he made up that epitaph. It wasn't just liquor talking. Move the sawbucks and marker so I can close the door."

"I'm not looking for a job, either," commented Morton as he obeyed. "What sort of a man in Henry Maxwell?"

"Nice fellow. The borax mines mean a lot to Sand Wells. I'm not figuring on hiring you, Mister. Business isn't that good."

"From the looks of things I'd say it's apt to pick up," said Morton dryly. "Better let me out before you close the door."

"If you want. You can go out the front door, you know. This side entrance is mostly for corpses."

Morton laughed as he descended the steps. "Here's hoping neither one of us uses it in that fashion. So long, Mr. Snodgrass, and good luck to you."

The undertaker's mournful farewell, cut off by the closing door, floated after him. He never expected to see the doleful Mr. Snodgrass again.

He was awaiting his turn in the barber shop when he heard the commotion down the street. The man in the chair got up and ran to the door with the others to look. It was Sam Trench, the hotel owner.

"What's all the shouting about?" called out the barber, following.

Morton glanced swiftly around the shop, discovered he was the only customer still in the place, and then got up and ambled toward the door. Men were shouting out in the street a dog was barking, and people were turning to look.

"By grabs!" shouted Trench, jerking the towel from around his neck and tossing it behind him. "That's down in front of my hotel." And he dashed out to sprint along the middle of the dusty street.

"I reckon that makes me next," said Morton, touching the barber on the shoulder.

"After I see what the ruckus is about," said the barber, following the exodus from the shop.

Left alone, Morton shrugged, put on his hat, and went out.

Some eighty yards down the street, in front of the hotel, was a freighting wagon. The driver was standing by a front wheel talking to a lanky man with a sagging vest and a sagging Sandy moustache. Men were milling around the high-boarded wagon, shouting words that gradually evolved into a sort of chant.

"Abe Meade's dead! Abe Meade's dead!"

Before Morton could reach the spot the two men finished their palaver, and the driver climbed back to his seat while the sagging individual pointed in Morton's direction and then legged it for the bank building. The freighter started his team, the milling crowd falling in alongside and marching with the wagon. Sam Trench halted and started walking back beside the front wheel, talking up at the driver.

Morton recognized his two acquaintances, Lem Nolan and Joe Blake, in the crowd as he watched the queer procession go past. The freight wagon driver and the cowboy appeared delighted at what had happened, and Morton wondered why. As he turned to see the wagon pull up in front of the funeral parlor two men brushed by him. One was the saggy man on whose vest Morton now caught a glimpse of a badge. The other was a grey-haired man carrying a little black bag. Morton followed them.

There was a brief altercation at the heavy wagon about driving into the side yard. The driver didn't want to do it. Ebenezzar Snodgrass came trotting out, and Henry Maxwell crossed the street. When the driver appealed to him, he peremptorily ordered the man to drive into the yard.

Steve Morton promptly fell into step with the undertaker and followed into the yard with the others. The law officer let him pass but stopped the rest of the crowd and closed the gate.

"Now then," said Maxwell, holding up his hand for silence. "Just what happened, Hardwick?"

"It's old man Meade, Mr. Maxwell," explained the driver. "I got his body in the wagon. I found him layin' in the trail just south of Anderson's ranch. Gunfight. He was dead, so I brung him on to town."

"Back your wagon up to the side door," ordered the lawman. "Eben, let's get the corpse into your place."

"I'll help you, Mr. Snodgrass," Morton murmured in the little man's ear. "Guess I might as well finish my job."

While the others stood waiting, Morton assisted the two men in unloading the corpse.

"This is Morton," explained Snodgrass when the officer looked curiously at his second helper. "Morton, this is Matt Quigley, peace marshal of Sand Wells."

"Howdy, Marshal," said Morton easily.

Quigley grunted a response, and they lifted the dead man out of the wagon and carried the body in to place it on boards that Snodgrass hastily arranged on his sawhorses. The victim wasn't a pretty sight. He had been shot in the side of the head, and blood had run out of his nostrils and mouth. The grey-haired man bent over the body.

"Now, let's have your story, Hardwick, while Doc Stamms looks him over," ordered Quigley.

"I was comin' to town with a load from the mines," explained the freighter. "I didn't hear or see nothin' till I rounded the bend where the trail runs between them two low red hills about fifteen miles from here. You now where that cedar thicket is on the left hill go in—"

"I know the place," interrupted Quigley curtly. "Get further."

"That's all," said Hardwick, a bit crestfallen at being cheated out of a lengthy explanation. "There he was in the road, dead as a mackerel, his six-gun by his hand. No horse, no sound or sight of anybody else. I couldn't leave him layin' there, so I brung him in."

The doctor glanced back over his shoulder. "He was killed some time this morning," he said. "Looks like a thirty-thirty hole. He was shot in the side of the head, the bullet ranging upward. The man who shot him must have been on the ground—anyway, below him."

Quigley tugged at his drooping moustache and frowned. He asked a few pointed questions, but elicited no further information. Snodgrass joined the doctor beside the body.

Without appearing to do so, Morton keenly studied the other men. Hardwick, a typical freighting man, had obviously told all he knew. Sam Trench alternately gnawed and blew on his walrus moustache, his sharp dark eyes darting from one

spot to another. Henry Maxwell's red face was inscrutable as he listened.

Finally the peace marshal went over and drew the dead man's gun from its holster where Hardwick had put it. Quigley examined the weapon, calling general attention to the fact that three cartridges had been recently fired.

"Reckon that's all there is to it," he concluded. "Abe Meade finally met a man who was faster than he was. I guess you can prepare the body for burial, Eben."

"How can you say that, Marshal?" asked Morton a bit grimly. "Didn't you hear Doctor Stamms say he was shot with a rifle? What kind of a gun duel is that—a carbine against a six-shooter?"

"Pretty good rifle handling, I'd call it," said Quigley. "Meade shot three times, didn't he? He wasn't a man to use a six-gun if his target wasn't close enough to hit. He must of wounded the other feller. Hardwick said there was plenty of blood. And Doc Stamms said the rifleman must of been layin' on the ground, the way the bullet ranged up. Plain case of lead poison and no more questions to be asked, the way I see it."

"Folks are pretty anxious hereabouts to bury Abe Meade, aren't they?" remarked Morton in heavy irony.

"I don't see that it's any of your business, Morton," said Henry Maxwell, breaking his silence. "Do you want to make something of this?"

For an instant Morton and the borax mining company manager stared at each other, and Maxwell's grey eyes were no colder than the icy blue gaze of the tall stranger in Sand Wells.

"Not unless you want me to tell these men about the little talk we had in your office, Maxwell," said Morton. "Which same might be considered more important, now Abe Meade is dead."

"Sorry, Morton," said Maxwell hastily. "I mean no offence. I was just asking how you felt about this matter."

"Of course," said Morton. He turned to the lawman. "But aren't you going to investigate any further, Quigley? Everywhere I've been a man isn't just killed and planted without some sort of inquiry."



Quigley sighed and tugged at his moustache. He explained as though he were instructing a small boy.

"In the first place, Morton, I'm just the town marshal of Sand Wells. This shooting took place outside my jurisdiction. In the second place, all evidence points to a fair fight. In the third place, Abe Meade had a good killing coming to him."

"Aren't you even going to question John Anderson?"

"John Anderson?" repeated Quigley. "Why should I?"

Helplessly Morton turned toward Snodgrass and then looked toward the waiting coffin. The stout little undertaker merely stared back owlishly.

"Besides," went on Quigley patiently, "if the other feller was shot up some we'll soon know who it was, and he can tell his side of the story."

"Which strikes me as a sensible piece of logic," said Sam Trench. "Are you a lawman, Morton?"

"No," admitted Morton truthfully.

"Then what's your stake in this business?" Trench demanded.

"None," was Morton's curt reply.

"Then I think this inquiry can be closed," said Maxwell crisply. "I'll have Hardwick stop by the Old Anchor and notify Meade's crew. Anybody know of any relations Meade had? I don't"

"Not unless Morton here is his long-lost son come home," said Trench with a sneer.

Morton stared hard at the hotel owner, and it was Trench who moved restlessly under the gaze of those blue eyes. Morton found he was beginning to dislike the hotel man.

"Sorry," Morton said quietly, "but I can't qualify. I almost wish I could. I've seen sewed-up poker games before. I hope all you men know what you're doing. Somebody seems to have cut the Gordian Knot for you, Maxwell."

Maxwell merely glared at him without speaking. The doctor was still looking over the body, the undertaker beside him. The other men were all watching and waiting.

"I might as well make this 'inquest' unanimous," went on Morton. "As you gents have been kind enough to point out, this is none of my affair. So I'll be moseying along back to the barber shop for my haircut."

"Use the front door this time," said Snodgrass mournfully, "The yard gate is closed."

"Blazes!" suddenly ejaculated Dr. Stamms.

All eyes turned swiftly to him. He was bending closely over the head of the dead man, his fingers manoeuvring around the mouth.

"This isn't Abe Meade!" he shouted.

"What?" cried Sam Trench, his face turning pale.

"Not Abe Meade?" repeated Quigley stupidly. "Looks like him to me."

"Maybe so, but this isn't him," said the doctor decisively. "I ought to know. I made a set of false teeth for Meade a year ago. This cadaver has natural teeth."

It was Maxwell's turn to be jarred out of his calm. The mine manager stepped forward and bent over the sawhorse bench to stare at the corpse.

"That's impossible!" he clipped out. "This must be Meade. If it isn't—who is it?"

"Sometimes a body's hard to identify after death," said the undertaker mournfully, "but I agree with Doc Stamms. This feller was several years younger'n Abe Meade in my opinion."

Marshal Quigley examined the tobacco-stained teeth. "Ain't anybody ever seen this stranger before?" he asked plaintively.

There was no answer as the others shook their heads. Morton noted that Sam Trench looked positively ill. He felt sure the hotel keeper was holding back something, but Trench did not break his silence.

"Why not search the body, Marshal?" suggested Morton dryly. "You might find something."

Quigley started guiltily and then sheepishly began emptying the dead man's pockets. Morton moved to the foot of the improvised trestle and studied the body carefully.

The dead man had possibly been in his late forties. His hair was very grey at the temples, his face craggy, his mouth wide and humorous. He was dressed in an ordinary black suit and a pair of fairly new cowboy boots. Everything about him showed signs of wear except the boots.

As Morton's gaze reached the dusty boots his eyes narrowed suddenly. The entire heel of the left boot was missing. Some-

where, somehow the dead man had recently lost his heel. The exposed leather wasn't the slightest bit soiled.

Quigley's search brought a meagre handful of possessions into view. There was a suspender button, a slim handful of change, a barlow pocket knife, half a plug of chewing tobacco and a buckskin money pouch. The money pouch yielded less than ten dollars in cash and a folded envelope. There was nothing else.

"Travelled light," said Snodgrass critically. "No indication that the pockets was disturbed before. This won't pay the cost of burying him."

Marshal Quigley unfolded the envelope. It was the cover of a cancelled letter, the postmark torn away with the stamp. It was addressed to Stanley Burke at Shreveport, Louisiana. There was nothing inside.

"Looks like his name might of been Stanley Burke," announced Quigley. "If this was his letter."

"Stanley Burke!" came a choking cry for Sam Trench. He looked around nervously as everybody eyed him. He gnawed at his moustache and then, as nobody spoke, he went on. "I guess this must be Burke all right. I didn't recognize him."

"Who is Burke?" demanded Maxwell tersely.

Trench smiled in sickly fashion. "Just a pilgrim who came in by train yesterday. He put up at the hotel with his sick wife and his daughter. The women folks are at the hotel now. The gal's right pretty little thing named Sally."

"Let me see that envelope," said Maxwell, taking it from the marshal's hand.

He studied the scrawled superscription as Morton drew near and looked over his shoulder.

"There's something pencilled on the back," observed Morton.

Maxwell whipped the envelope over and turned it to reveal a name and address written in a neat, firm hand.

"'Abe Meade,'" he read aloud, "'nineteen miles north of Sand Wells, New Mexico.' This man evidently was on his way to see Meade. That old hellion may be cooking up another trick of some kind. He could have killed this man himself."

"No matter who did it, I've still got to bury the corpse," said Snodgrass sadly. "And where's the money coming from, unless his wife has it?"

"Maybe she has," said Quigley, tugging at his moustache and scowling. "You just hold up, Eben, while I go to the hotel with Sam and get the gal to come and see if this is her paw."

"There's nothing more we can do here," stated Maxwell, handing the envelope back to the marshal. "Come on, Hardwick."

The group broke up, filing through the side entrance to the yard, leaving Morton and the sad-faced undertaker standing there. Morton quietly started rolling up his sleeves.

"I guess we'd better tidy up the dead man some before a woman has to see him."

"That's right," agreed Snodgrass. "But I'm still not hiring you, young feller."

"No," responded Morton soberly. "No, you're not. But I have a feeling a job is shaping up for me in Sand Wells, after all."

CHAPTER THREE

SHE was a pretty little thing as she came scurrying down the street, her head bobbing along just at the shoulder of the lanky peace marshal. Steve Morton stood inside the front doorway of the funeral parlor and studied her as she approached. She couldn't have been more than twenty at most, with lovely brown hair over which she had thrown a light shawl, big black eyes and pale features. She wore a plaid silk dress with leg-o'-mutton sleeves and full skirt that accentuated the slimness of her waist. Morton reckoned that she wouldn't have weighed a hundred, and ten pounds soaking wet.

He knew before she arrived that this girl was the daughter of the dead man. She had the same wide, humorous mouth, the same type of craggy features in a refined and feminine sort of way. But now her face was pale and strained, and she hurried along in a sort of nervous anxiety which made Morton think of a delicate sumac leaf blowing before an early fall breeze.

Sally Burke was definitely not a child of the rough and ready frontier country. Women like this, reflected Morton, had no business in the pioneer regions. They weren't fitted for such a hard life. But they always came—and most of them survived courageously. Nevertheless, his heart swelled with pity for this girl when Marshal Quigley ushered her into the mortuary.

"Miss Burke, this here is a hairpin name of Morton," informed Quigley, and Morton swept off his Stetson and bowed silently.

For an instant Sally Burke stared at him, conscious of the quiet strength of this tall, dark-haired man with the kind blue eyes and the pleasant smile.

"Is he—is he the one who—" faltered Sally, looking appealingly at Morton.

"Nope," supplied Quigley. "Company freighter name of Hardwick brought the body in." And then as Morton looked

questioningly beyond the marshal's back for the missing hotel owner, he added, "Trench'll be along directly. Went over to Kilgore's stable first. Yonder's Eben Snodgrass, the undertaker, Miss Burke."

Sally turned uncertainly toward the sad-faced Snodgrass. She glanced around the front room of the funeral parlor apprehensively.

"Howdy, Miss," the fat little man said mournfully. "I reckon Marshal Quigley's told you what we have to ask you to do. If you're ready, just follow me to the back room. There's nothing to be afraid of, and maybe it ain't your paw anyhow."

Snodgrass and Quigley herded the girl on to the rear and Morton silently followed. He watched the girl's straight back and observed how her slender fingers kept gripping and relaxing at her sides.

"Game little thoroughbred," he murmured to himself.

Snodgrass led the girl to the side where the ugly bullet wound did not show and, after glancing at her to see if she could stand the sight, he turned back the sheet which was now draped over the body on the trestle.

Sally Burke stood there without moving, as motionless as if she had suddenly been turned into a statue. Only her eyes lived, burning like two great dark coals in her ashen face as she gazed down on the dead man. Her nervous fingers had stilled. She did not cry out. She just looked for a long moment.

"Daddy!" she whispered finally. "Oh, my God!"

Without warning she became unhinged at the knees. She crumpled and would have fallen to the floor had not Morton leaped forward and caught her in his arms. He held her there against his broad chest like a wilted little flower, and his eyes grew moist as he gazed down at her slender white throat where no pulse was perceptible. He noticed now, too, how threadbare was the taffeta silk dress she wore.

Silently he nodded at Snodgrass to recover the corpse, then he turned to carry the unconscious girl back to the front room.

"Guess I'd better go get Doc Stamms again, huh?" asked Quigley doubtfully.

"No," said Morton. "Just get some cold water."

"I got a bottle of whiskey," offered Snodgrass in his sad monotone. "Use it to keep off mosquitoes."

"Haw!" exploded Quigley. "There ain't a miskeeter within a hundred miles of Sand Wells, and you know it, Eben."

"Just get some cold water," ordered Morton crisply.

He gently placed the still, white faced little figure down on a worn leather davenport in the front room, head toward the foot, and sat on the edge of the couch and began chafing the girl's cold hands. Snodgrass trotted in with a pitcher of water and began sprinkling it on her face.

In a few moments Sally stirred slightly, moaned and opened her eyes. She started up wildly and would have struggled to her feet when her gaze fell on Morton's solicitous face and she quieted magically. There was something magnetic about this big stranger that soothed and reassured her. Steve Morton had that effect on women, children and horses.

"My father," she murmured. "Yes, that was my father. Oh my poor mother. This will kill her." She began to sob softly.

"There, there, Sally," Morton said gently, helping her to sit up. "Don't take it so hard. Reckon there comes a time to all of us when we have to lose someone we love a heap. I'm sure your dad would want you to be brave, so you can help him now."

"Help him?" Sally stopped crying and looked at Morton in surprise. "How can I do that now—now he's gone?"

"By telling us all you can, so we can try and find out who killed your dad," said Morton. "You see he didn't just die. He was—well, I reckon it could be called murder."

"Oh!" gasped Sally. "I—I see."

"Miss Burke, if you're feeling up to it now, I want to ask you a few questions," said Marshal Quigley. "What was your paw doing out on the north trail?"

"North trail?" Sally echoed blankly, shrinking closer to Morton. "I don't know. I—I don't understand."

"He was found about fifteen miles north of town on the road to Dutchman's Desert," explained Morton gently. "Do you know what purpose he had for going into that part of the country?"

"No. No, I don't."

"Come, gal," said Quigley, his tone growing impatient. "You must know something. You knew your Dad wasn't at the hotel, didn't you?"

"Oh, yes. My father left early this morning. He—he told us

to stay at the hotel and—and not worry. He said he had some business to tend to and would be back sometime tonight. He didn't tell me where he was going. He may have told Mother. But I didn't know just where he was. Please tell me how it happened."

"We don't know much about it," said Quigley, complying with a brief account. "Did your paw have any money on him?"

"All we had in the world," replied Sally faintly.

"How much?" demanded Quigley in his usual blunt manner.

"I—I don't know. He wore it in a money belt around his waist. We—we aren't very rich."

The three men glanced at each other. There had been no money belt on the dead man. Morton found himself wondering if robbery had been added to the ruthless killing of Stanley Burke.

"There was only nine dollars and thirty-five cents in a coin pouch in his right-hand pants pocket," volunteered Snodgrass. "I'm holding it with his gun and other effects. Nothing much else. His clothes didn't look like he had been robbed."

"My father wore a snake-skin money belt around his waist under his clothes," Sally stated firmly. "I don't know how much money it contained, but I'm sure he had it on when he left the hotel."

"Maybe your maw knows how much money he was carrying and where he was going," said Marshal Quigley. "Reckon I'll have to ask her."

"Oh, no, please don't," Sally protested quickly. "I'll ask her. I must break the news to her." Her dark eyes filled with tears and her soft young lips quivered. "I—I don't know what we're going to do!"

"Take it easy, Miss Sally," said Morton soothingly. "We'll figure things out somehow."

"But we didn't have much money," said Sally worriedly. "And now we haven't any. We're strangers in a strange land."

The entrance of Sam Trench furnished an interruption. The hotel man, came forward, removing his hat, and mopping his brow.

"Reckon that was Burke all right," he said. "Kilgore told me he rented a horse about six o'clock this morning to ride

up to the Old Anchor. Put up a twenty-dollar deposit on the nag. The horse hasn't come in yet. Likely straying somewhere south of the PDQ."

"Twenty dollars'll help some," said Snodgrass, "You'll get that back, Miss Burke, when Kilgore's horse drifts back to the livery barn."

"You folks hard up?" asked Trench, addressing the girl. "I'm mighty sorry, Miss Sally. What are you going to do?"

"I—I don't know," faltered Sally.

"You and your mother are welcome to stay the week out at the hotel with no cost," offered Trench heartily. "And I reckon we can take up a collection for——"

"No, no!" exclaimed Sally quickly, flushing and drawing herself proudly erect. "You gentlemen are all so kind, but we can't accept charity. This is all so horrible and so sudden, but—but——"

"Wait right here," said Snodgrass, grabbing his plug hat from a wall rack and setting it on his bald head. "I'll be back in a minute."

Morton squarely confronted the peace marshal. "Just what are you going to do about the killing itself, Quigley?" he asked bluntly.

Quigley shot him a cagey glance, then looked aside as he tugged at the port-side of his sagging moustache.

"Danged if you ain't a pest, Morton," he mumbled, lowering his voice so the girl couldn't hear. "I told you before I'm only the town marshal. The fact the dead man ain't who we thought don't change the way he died none."

"Then you don't intend to do anything about it?" Morton asked flatly.

"I'll do everything I can do," declared Quigley angrily, "but I ain't going to act like a territorial marshal, if that's what you mean. And you better keep your bill outa things if you want to stay healthy. You don't understand things around here."

"No, I don't," admitted Morton frankly. "But I'm beginning to get a right good inkling."

Trench, who had been conversing with Sally while the other two men were arguing, kept flashing a darting glance at Morton's broad back, and there was something almost vindictive in the swift look. Now he turned abruptly from the

girl and addressed the dark-haired stranger as Morton swung around to face him.

"From what I've seen of you, Morton," Trench said in an ugly tone, "you're a trouble-maker. You take my advice and mind your own business. We can handle things here in Sand Wells without your help. If you're smart, you'll fork your bronc and get along with your drifting."

Morton felt a cold rage sweeping over him as he stood staring at the hotel owner. He was decidedly weary of the ruthless, arrogant attitude of the men in this town. The way they brushed everything aside in order to gratify their own whims—or was there more to it than merely a sop to their inflated egos? Were Trench and the marshal trying to cover some guilty knowledge and that was why they resented a stranger asking questions? Morton didn't know the answers yet, but he intended to learn them if it was humanly possible.

"Thanks," he said quietly. "And from what I've seen of you Trench, I——" He broke off with a mocking smile. "No, I won't say it, since you've made a kindly offer to Miss Burke."

Trench laughed curtly. "Say anything you're man enough to say," he invited. "Start anything you think you're big enough to finish."

"And have Marshal Quigley take a hand in the fracas—since this is in his territory, eh?" said Morton. "No, thanks, Trench. This hardly seems the time or the place for anything of that sort. Reckon I've got too much respect for Miss Burke and the deceased to start trouble here, even if you and Quigley haven't, Trench."

Trench flushed and lapsed into silence. Further talk was interrupted by the return of Ebenezzar Snodgrass. The undertaker trotted into the house with a strikingly handsome woman in tow. Trench retreated a pace, abashed, as he recognized the newcomer. Morton surveyed the woman curiously.

"This is the gal, Belle," said Snodgrass to his companion. "Sally, let me make you acquainted with Belle Howard, one of the finest women ever to walk the street of Sand Wells."

Belle Howard ignored all the men present, going swiftly to the side of the grief-stricken and perplexed girl and putting her arm around Sally's shoulders.

"My dear child," Belle said in a husky contralto voice.

"I'm terribly sorry to hear of your trouble. You and your mother are going to move in with me at once."

Sally stiffened at first in protest. "Oh, we couldn't! Thank you a lot for your kindness, Mrs. Howard, but we—we can't accept charity."

"Miss Howard," corrected Belle. "And you needn't show any pride. Not another word, my dear. I won't hear of any other arrangement. And it isn't charity. We will work out something. Can you sing? Or dance?"

"Why, I sing a little—and play the piano," Sally answered, slowly responding to the other woman's motherly attitude. "But I don't understand——"

"Belle runs the Palace Dance Hall," explained Snodgrass.

"And I can certainly use a good musician and vocalist," added Belle emphatically. "Come along with me dearie, and we will discuss things to your entire satisfaction."

Sally smiled faintly for the first time. It was an expression that lighted up her face like a lamp behind a delicately tinted window.

"Oh, if I can work for what we get, that's different," she said. "At least, Mother and I can stay here until we save enough money to get back to Louisiana."

Morton thought of objecting, but he eyed Belle Howard keenly and decided to remain silent. Somebody had to take care of this proud little beauty and her invalid mother. Why not Belle Howard?

Belle was a pretty brunette in her thirties, plump but comely. Her beauty was shadowed by a certain hardness of eye and voice, and a rather firm expression around her generous mouth. Morton had known dozens of women like Belle Howard, typical daughters of frontier entertainment. Most of them proved to have hearts of gold beneath their tough exterior. Anyway, this was a temporary solution.

Sally looked at Morton, a question in her large dark eyes.

"Why not go with Miss Howard, Sally?" he said, smiling encouragement at her. "I think you and your mother will be in safe hands."

Belle Howard tilted her head and looked Morton over coolly. She liked what she saw.

"You're not so bad looking yourself, cowboy," she said in her throaty voice. "Come over to the Palace. I'll give you a

dance any time. Come on honey, let's get out of here. This is a hell of place to bring a young girl. Quigley, you oughta had more sense."

Even as the older woman ushered her away, Sally laid a hand each on the arms of Morton and Trench.

"Thank you both for being so kind to me," she said placatingly. "Please don't fight. And thank all of you," she added, including Snodgrass and Quigley in her glance. "I know you will do everything you can to help."

"Humph!" snorted Belle Howard expressively, dragging Sally away like a brahma bull trailing a lariat.

In the silence that followed their departure Snodgrass turned his owlish gaze upon Marshal Quigley.

"What am I going to do with Burke's body at that, Matt?" he asked.

"Get it ready for burial tomorrow," advised Quigley. "If nothing else happens, the town'll have to pay for it."

"Morton might go out and dig the grave in boothill," sneered Trench. "He's so danged anxious to help."

Morton put on his hat and adjusted it carefully as he eyed each one of the other men in turn. Then he strolled to the door. On the threshold he paused and glanced back.

"You know," he said softly. "I might do just that. I've dug and filled a few graves in my time."

The stout little undertaker shivered, though the day was warm as Morton stepped out through the door and disappeared. Then Snodgrass looked at the hotel keeper and the marshal and frowned.

"If you two are really looking for trouble," he said sadly. "I've got a feeling you've found it."

CHAPTER FOUR

PERHAPS a couple of miles northeast of the town of Sand Wells, in a small box canyon lost in a maze of rolling foothills, a husky boy in his teens had made a dry camp with a little band of three horses. He was an Indian, a tall and muscular Navajo, brown as the hills which surrounded him, clad in white drill breeches and white cotton shirt. Soft and pliable beaded moccasins were on his feet, and a red bandeau was around his head, binding down his black locks. A significant matter was the fact that he wore a wicked looking hunting knife in a sheath at his waist, and well-oiled Winchester rifle was within easy reach of his hand.

Two of the horses, the pinto and the grey, were hobbled to prevent their straying. The third horse, a magnificent coal black stallion, was as free as the air, but he did not wander off. Almost as much as the Indian boy he seemed to be alert and on guard, his ears constantly pricking forward and his great dark eyes surveying things around him in an intelligent manner. When a paper blew from the packs and rolled and fluttered past him in the slight breeze that sighed through the canyon, he tossed his noble head and whinnied softly.

The Indian paused and looked up with a smile.

"Ho, Ebony," he said in a pleasant voice. "You, too, look for the Senor, no?"

The great horse snorted and whinnied gently once again.

"Have patience, black one. He will be here soon." The Navajo boy glanced up at the early afternoon sun. He resumed his task of laying out provender to cook for the night's meal.

Suddenly he paused and cocked his head to listen. Down the canyon his keen ears caught the faint sound of a horse's hoofs, and sound so light that no white man could have heard it. Grasping his rifle, he rose to his feet and moved to take shelter behind a huge boulder.

At that moment the cry of a mountain lion came echoing

through the canyon. Instantly the Indian boy relaxed. He opened his mouth and responded with a like call. In a short while Steve Morton came riding along the canyon into view.

"Senor," cried the Navajo, his eyes lighting up as they always did upon the return of his patron.

Ebony nickered loudly and came trotting forward in delight.

"How, Eagle Wing," greeted Morton, swinging lithely down from his roan horse and striding forward, leading his mount by the reins. "And Ebony! What do you say, big feller?"

The great horse stepped daintily forward and muzzled his master's shoulder. Laughingly Morton patted the glossy neck and then reached into his pocket for the lump of sugar the black horse knew was there.

"Senor, I have made camp here as you directed," said Eagle Wing as he stripped the saddle from the sweating roan. "But, Senor, you did not get the supplies. You did not get the haircut!"

"No, Wing," said Morton soberly. "Instead, I ran into what looks like a peck of trouble for a pair of helpless women."

"Ah," breathed the Indian boy. "Tell me, Senor."

Morton obliged with a brief but graphic account of his experiences in Sand Wells. When he had finished Eagle Wing nodded sagely.

"Then you think, Senor, this is a job for the Dark Knight?" he asked.

"I'm afraid it is, Wing."

"Good," Eagle Wing grunted. "What we do first?"

Morton glanced at the sun, pleased to find it still high.

"The first thing to do is visit the spot where Hardwick found Burke's body," he decided. "I'm right curious to read signs there."

"Fine," said Eagle Wing. "I saddle Ebony and Grey Boy pronto. You will eat something, Senor?"

"No," said Morton. "I think I'll be eating supper with an old hellion named Abe Meade."

Eagle Wing swiftly saddled the two horses. And then Morton did a strange thing. From the saddle roll on the black stallion's back he drew forth a crushed black sombrero which he cuffed back into shape and put it on in lieu of the grey

Stetson he was wearing. Then he shook out a sombre black cloak and fastened it around his shoulders. A black domino mask completed his attire—and Steve Morton, cowboy, drifter and man of mystery had disappeared. In his place stood the Dark Knight, Robin Hood outlaw with a price on his head, a man feared by criminals and blessed by the oppressed people of the West.

Nobody knew much about this fantastic figure who rode the outland trails with blazing guns, ever coming to the succour of the helpless and the downtrodden. Even Eagle Wing, his close and intimate companion knew nothing of his past. All the Indian boy knew was that the Dark Knight was the scourge of evildoers and that he worked only for the good of those who needed his aid, stepping in when the law could or would not function.

Because of his activities, the Dark Knight had many times been blamed for gory crimes he had not committed. But this was a misfortune that Steve Morton, man of mystery, accepted, and Eagle Wing was content that it was so. Riding like the wind on his equally famous horse Ebony, the Dark Knight ever defended the weak and injured, delivering them from danger and tyranny. Roaming the trackless plains of the West, a homeless nomad, the Robin Hood outlaw avenged the innocent, administered justice and exacted retribution.

Less than three hours after riding away from their canyon hide-out the two trail partners reached the place where Stanley Burke's body had been found. The Dark Knight located it easily from Hardwick's description, judging it to be well within the PDQ range of John Anderson.

"This must be it, Wing," said the Dark Knight. "Let's take a good look around on foot."

Dismounting, and leaving their horses ground-hitched, they methodically went to work quartering the area. Both of them could track and read sign with the keenness of Eagle Wing's ancestors, and they rarely missed a trick.

In silence they studied the ground, not making any comparisons until they had both read all sign visible to them. Then, while Eagle Wing circled slowly around the environs like a bloodhound seeking a scent, the Dark Knight approached the spot in the trail where the dried life blood of Stanley Burke was still visible. Here the black clad man

stood, slowly turning around while his blue eyes searched every inch of the dusty road within ten yards.

Suddenly he expelled a quick breath of triumph, walked southward a couple of strides and retrieved something from a dusty rut. He examined his find carefully while he waited for his companion to finish. The sun, lowering redly in the west, was still above the horizon when the Indian boy approached and signified that he was ready to report.

"All right, Wing," said the Dark Knight in the stern and somewhat harsh tones he used when playing the role of the Robin Hood outlaw. "Tell me what you have read."

"Yes, Senor," responded the Navajo gravely, pointing out as he talked. "Only one man was shot here. There is mark where Burke, riding north, halted his horse and dismounted. He was shot and fell on the trail where this blood spot shows. Sliding mark shows that one foot slipped from under him. Over in thicket to left is evidence that man with rifle was hiding, but I did not find rifle shell."

"Whoever did this job was a pretty cagey feller, Wing. Go on."

"Then rifleman came out of thicket and walked to this spot. He wore cowboy boots. He stood here and looked down, maybe to make sure victim was dead. I can't see just how Burke was killed. Yonder toward north is spot where freighter stopped his wagon, got down and came to examine body. I cannot read more, as there are marks of many wagons and horses. Can you read what Eagle Wing has missed, Senor?"

"I think so, Wing," said the Dark Knight grimly. "See this?" And he extended the object he had picked up.

The Navajo boy nodded as he gazed at the object the black-clad man held in his hand. It was the heel from a man's fairly new boot, shorn clean away. Almost buried in the hard leather was a .45 calibre slug.

"Whoever it was that caused Burke to stop and light down must have been the man who shot his heel away," said the Dark Knight. "There were two killers. The first met Burke face to face and attracted his attention. They exchanged shots. The killer missed Burke, but he shot him in the heel and knocked him down. Then it was that the rifleman hiding in the thicket came out and stood above his victim. In cold blood he pointed his rifle and shot Burke in the temple.

Quigley and Dr. Stamms had it wrong. It was the killer who stood above his victim, instead of being on the ground and shooting up at Burke. That's why the bullet seemed to be ranging upward. In reality it ranged downward.

"Two killers guntrapped Stanley Burke and murdered him on this trail this morning. One of them wore cowboy boots and carried a rifle. The other, his marks obscured by so many others in the trail, came down the road southward and is a bad marksman with a six-gun."

"Yes, that is it," agreed Eagle Wing, in the rather pedantic English he had learned in a mission school. "He knocked Burke down by shooting off heel, and his rifle pardner killed him."

"There's one more angle to this," reflected the Dark Knight thoughtfully. "It's possible the first killer shot so poorly because he was too far away. And the second killer may have shot Burke from the thicket before coming out."

"That is true," said Eagle Wing. "But why do you think that, Senor?"

"Because there's no reason for killing Burke, a stranger. They must have mistaken him for Abraham Meade at a slight distance. And from what I gathered about Meade, no killer would have wanted to risk getting too close to him before shooting."

"So this Burke was killed by mistake?"

"Not only was he killed by mistake, Wing. He was guntrapped and murdered."

"Um! Bad medicine. You think the drygulchers found out their mistake, Senor?"

"Possibly not. Hardwick, the freighter, didn't know any better. Anyway, everybody will soon know that a mistake was made. Meanwhile, two women are deprived of husband and father and left helpless and broke in Sand Wells. And Marshal Quigley intends doing nothing about it."

"So the Dark Knight will take hand in game," said Eagle Wing confidently. "What do we do, Senor?"

"I want you to ride on to Meade's ranch and scout the situation there. Get a job of some kind if you can and wait for word from me."

"Very well, Senor. What will you do?"

"I'll go back to the hideout and swap horses. As Steve

Morton I'll return to town. Henry Maxwell offered me a job this morning. I'm going to take it."

"He wanted you to kill Abraham Meade for him."

"Yes. And that job is still open since two killers made a mistake here this morning," said the Dark Knight in cold tones. "I wasn't so curious before, but now I'm beginning to want to know how bad Meade deserves killing."

"You think maybe killers work for Maxwell?"

"I don't know. If so, why would Maxwell try to hire me for the job when he had a guntrap already set, and hadn't yet learned that it had failed?"

"On other hand, Anderson might be one of killers," suggested Eagle Wing.

"We won't overlook John Anderson," promised the Dark Knight grimly. "Whoever it was is going to pay for murdering the wrong man. Let's get going, Wing."

"Adios, Senor," said the Navajo boy, as he swung into his saddle.

"Hasta manana," returned the Dark Knight, stepping into his own saddle and heading the huge black stallion southward.

That simply they parted, each going to do his appointed task, making no complicated plans which might go awry, but falling in with things as they found them and letting the course of events shape their future actions.

But the plains country knew. The very wind seemed to whistle a more cheerful tune, and a field lark took off from his vantage point in the cedar thicket and soared up into the blue as he piped a joyous note. The entire range seemed to gather itself and crouch in breathless expectancy as the black-clad figure on the great black horse thundered across the prairie into the creeping nightfall, an ominous figure of doom riding the guntrap trail.

Onward rode the Dark Knight as the sun completely disappeared beyond the hills to the westward. Shadows lengthened as the night reached out to clutch the surrounding country with dark fingers. Ahead of the swiftly moving hoofs of the big stallion the road was a pale silver ribbon.

"Slow up a bit, Ebony," said the masked man, with a gentle tug on the reins. "You've had your run, no use tiring yourself out for nothing."

The great horse slowed, soothed and quieted by that voice

he knew so well. Yet Ebony's pace was still such that the trees on either side of the road seemed to march by in orderly array.

The Dark Knight realized he must still be close, if not actually travelling through, part of John Anderson's PDQ range though he was not familiar enough with this part of the country to be sure whether the ranch bordered on this obviously public highway.

It was one of the few occasions during the course of his hectic career when he was not expecting trouble, so he was not ready for it when it came like a bolt from the blue.

Off to his right a rifle roared, the sound echoing and re-echoing through the silence like the cracking of a giant whip. A bullet seered the broad back of the Dark Knight as it tore through the cloak he wore that billowed out behind him. He reeled in the saddle, for even the bare touch of a .45-70 slug can have all the power of a blow from a hammer. He recovered quickly. A swift tug on the left rein and Ebony left the road to do crashing through brush and beneath tree branches on the opposite side of the highway from that which the drygulcher's bullet had come.

Experience had taught the Dark Knight that a man was a fool who tried to battle the longer range of a rifle with six-guns when there was a chance to get away alive. In a matter of moments he was safe in the shadows, for the time being at least, and he brought the black stallion to a halt.

"Either somebody figured I was the Dark Knight and tried to down me or were just waiting to drygulch anyone who came along the road" decided the Robin Hood outlaw. "Now, I wonder?"

He dropped Ebony's reins and silently slid out of the saddle. Swiftly he drew his own carbine out of the saddleboot. If there was to be any more rifle shooting he wanted to be able to take his part in the proceedings.

For a long moment he stood waiting and listening, but there was no sound from the other side of the road. The drygulcher also was evidently playing it safe. The Black Knight didn't like it. This sort of waiting game could be continued far into the night, and even into the dawn of a new day.

Far down the road in the direction from which the Dark Knight had just come came the distant pounding of a horse's

hoofs, the sound gradually growing louder as a rider approached.

"This appears to be the company my pard across the road has been expecting," muttered the Dark Knight. "Which presents a problem. If I let the man on the horse get close enough he's likely to be killed by the drygulcher—much to his regret and mine. I'd better do something about it quick."

Swiftly he moved to a big boulder close to the edge of the road. He found the huge rock had its advantages when he took the right position. It protected him from the drygulcher across the road, and also gave him a good view of the approaching horseman.

The man in the saddle was still too far off to be recognized though still coming steadily closer. The Dark Knight felt he would be much happier if the rider went some place else in a hurry.

"Maybe I better sort of suggest it," muttered the Dark Knight.

He raised the carbine to his right shoulder, took careful aim and then fired. The bullet lifted the horseman's hat off his head as though it had suddenly been caught in a high wind. That was all the hint he needed to make him certain he was in dangerous territory. He wheeled his mount and raced back along the road in the direction from which he had come.

"That's better." The Dark Knight breathed a sigh of relief as he pumped the lever and ejected the empty shell from the carbine. "And if he comes back for his hat he's a bigger fool than I think."

From across the road came the roar of a rifle and a bullet smacked against the opposite side of the big boulder. Obviously the drygulcher was expressing his rage with bullets, for two more slugs spattered again the rock. The Dark Knight reached down and picked up the empty shell and put it in his pocket. He had no intention of leaving any evidence of his ever having been here.

He didn't see much point in hanging around and exchanging shots with a man he couldn't even see. It struck him as a waste of bullets. Besides the man on the horse might decide to circle around and come hunting the man he was sure had tried to down him. If in doing so he found the original drygulcher

and the gent with the rifle got shot that was all right with the Dark Knight. He didn't intend to linger to see what eventually might happen.

Swiftly and silently he made his way back to Ebony, thrust the carbine in the saddleboot and mounted. He rode back through the trees getting steadily farther and farther away from the road. Then he finally circled around and came back out on the road two miles from where he had left it and not so very far from the hideout.

"Reckon I'll get me something to eat, then head back to town as Steve Morton," said the Dark Knight. "No hurry about it. Might as well give that drygulcher time to stop waiting around and go home. I'm plumb tired of him anyway."

CHAPTER FIVE

NEXT to the hotel, the Palace Dance Hall was the most pretentious building in Sand Wells. It was even larger than the two-storied bank building. Built by the enterprising Faro Thorpe, the dance hall was a two-storied, double building which housed a saloon and gambling joint on one side and a huge dance floor on the other. The two establishments were connected by a wide archway in the middle of the bisecting wall. Upstairs over both buildings were rooms and living quarters for the dance hall girls and other employees of the Thorpe interests.

Belle Howard, queen of the roost, had a suite of three rooms in the corner above the rear of the dance hall. Cheap and somewhat tawdry, it was clean and decent. For Belle Howard tolerated no monkey business here. Any dance hall girl who couldn't behave herself had to move out, possibly finding more suitable quarters at the Mexican cantina at the other end of town. No matter what gambling, drinking or brawling took place on the first floor of the combination business houses, nothing indecent intruded above stairs. No drinking in the rooms, no men visitors, no gambling, no rough-house.

Whether or not Faro Thorpe wholly concurred in this straight-laced arrangement, he abided by it. He had hired Belle Howard to run the dance hall, and he had to accept her on her own terms. It had proved a paying proposition.

He stood now in the archway between the saloon and dance hall, immaculate in his Prince Albert coat and carefully creased trousers of black broadcloth, his creamy waistcoat of tiny-flowered satin, his white shirt and black silk bow tie, and surveyed the night crowd in both places. Pay day at the mines always stimulated the entertainment business.

Faro Thorpe was a well-built man of medium height and in his late thirties. His colouring was as fair as that of a Norseman, his hair a shining blond and his eyes as blue as a mountain tarn. He was cleanshaven, quiet of manner and with a

soft, pleasant and persuasive voice. Fairly well educated, he had come to this part of the country from San Francisco about the time that George Anderson had died a couple of years previously. Having money, he had opened his house of entertainment and had started buying property about town.

Easily the most influential citizen of Sand Wells, he was by no means a timid or fearful man. In a pair of spring-clip shoulder holsters beneath his smoothly tailored Prince Albert he wore a pair of nickel-plated, pearl-handled .38 revolvers which he knew how to use. And although he rarely let himself get caught in matters of physical violence, he could fight like a jungle cat and with the proficiency of a lumberjack. He hadn't spent half his life on the Barbary Coast for nothing.

There was one fly in his ointment. Ever a self-controlled and quiet man, a shrewdly calculating individual who planned and executed his schemes without fuss or feathers, without raving or ranting, he had begun to make plans for the future which included Belle Howard, his business partner. But he had neglected to let Belle in on the fact that he was falling for her, and of late he had noted with growing disapproval that Henry Maxwell, resident manager of the borax mines from which he derived a large part of his income, was becoming too interested in the same lady.

Thorpe watched now, without seeming to do so, as Maxwell danced with Belle to the piano music of an old Viennese waltz. Most of the other dancers had drifted to the sides of the huge floor and stood also watching the performing couple. The fiddler and the regular piano player sat idly on the little dais at the end of the hall while a new pianist played the music that was so rare in a place of this sort.

There was no doubt that Maxwell was a good waltzer. Thorpe had seen many dancers in his time, and he had to admit this. But he didn't like it. His face calm and inscrutable, the gambler drew a slim cigar from his breast pocket and carefully lighted it. He glanced through the delicate smoke fog he created toward the musicians' dais and studied the slender back of the dark-haired girl who was playing the piano so expertly and beautifully.

As he looked, she finished the waltz and dropped her hands. Thorpe caught Belle Howard's eye and jerked his head

imperceptibly. The woman smiled at her partner and easily led him toward the archway.

"Hello, Thorpe," greeted Maxwell.

"Good evening, Mr. Maxwell," said Thorpe evenly. "Enjoying yourself?"

"Very much, thanks to Miss Howard. Join me in a drink?"

"No, thanks. If you'll pardon us, I'd like to speak to Belle for a moment."

"Of course. Thanks for the dance, Belle."

"It was delightful, Henry."

Maxwell bowed and went on into the bar-room. Belle halted at the side of her employer and business partner—she was the same height as Thorpe—and looked at him levelly.

"That girl at the piano." Thorpe answered her unspoken question. "Who is she? I never saw her before."

"That's the daughter of the man who was killed out on the mine trail this morning. Her name is Sally Burke. I gave her a job."

Thorpe raised his blond eyebrows light and flicked a glance at the girl, then brought his blue eyes back to Belle.

"Oh, yes, I heard about that stranger. I didn't know he even had a family. And you've got her playing the piano here—with her father not yet buried?"

"Don't act so shocked, Faro," said Belle with a mocking light in her brown eyes. "I know you well enough to be certain nothing shocks you. The girl is just playing a little while to get accustomed to the place. It's good for her. She and her mother are living at the hotel. They are moving in with me tomorrow."

Thorpe frowned. "Moving in with you?"

"Have you any objections?"

He shrugged. "None at all, my dear," he said smoothly. "It just seems a bit quaint. Aren't you being a little too generous?"

Belle gazed at him coolly. She knew what he meant. It did seem incongruous. Here she was, a dance hall mistress in her gawdy décolleté black and gold dress and her war paint, playing hostess to a pair of women from a refined home.

"The devil with you, Mister," she said flatly. "It's little you know about the heart of a woman."

"I may know more than you realize," Thorpe said quietly, completely unruffled. "If it's money the girl needs to take her

back home, give it to her and charge it up to house expense. She's not the type to mix here."

"She has pride, Faro. She won't accept anything. But you're a gentleman for offering it, and I'll tell her."

"Tell her what you please," said Thorpe, shrugging, "but you might also remember that I am a gentleman."

Before Belle had time to react to this unusual remark from her employer a footfall sounded behind them and a man's voice broke in on their conversation.

"Hello there, Belle. How's my best gal tonight? Howdy, Thorpe. How about a little game this evening?"

Both of them turned to see a tall and sinewy young man in rangeland garb. He was a red-headed chap with greenish-blue eyes. His face was tanned and had sun wrinkles, but it was a pleasant enough countenance save for the wilful expression around the mouth and the slightly petulant pout to the thin lips.

"Hello, Anderson," said Thorpe, smiling. "I guess a little session can be arranged, but hadn't you better go slow on your gambling?"

"I want some revenge," declared Anderson, half in jest and half in earnest.

"Later then, if you insist," agreed Thorpe.

"A hell of a swain you are, John Anderson," said Belle frankly. "Talking about best girls and cards in the same breath."

"Aw, now Belle," protested Anderson. "You know I'm just making talk with Thorpe. You're the reason I came to town. How about a dance?" and he started pulling her out onto the floor. "Say! Who's your new piano player?"

"Come with me and meet her," suggested Belle. "You should be interested at that. She's the daughter of a man who got killed today by mistake—mistaken for Abe Meade."

Both Belle and Thorpe watched the young owner of the PDQ intently, alert for any revealing change of expression. Anderson's eyes went wide, and he scowled at mention of Meade's name.

"Don't reckon I've heard about that," he said thinly.

Thorpe glanced toward the front of the saloon. His eyes narrowed slightly at sight of the tall dark-haired man in range clothes who had just entered through the batwings in company with Peace Marshal Quigley. The stranger stopped

at the bar beside Maxwell, joining the mine manager in a drink, while Quigley advanced on the trio in the archway.

"Howdy," the peace marshal greeted them in his dry fashion. "Thought I heard you folks say something about the Burke killing. Don't reckon you know anything about it, do you, Anderson?"

"I don't reckon I'd tell you if I did," answered the PDQ owner.

"Nope," agreed the peace officer, not at all perturbed. "But it happened on your range. No harm in asking."

"Who's your friend, Quigley?" asked Thorpe with a quick glance toward the two men at the bar. "The man you just came in with."

"Him? Name's Steve Morton," said the lawman. "He's a stranger who blew in this morning. Nosy sort of cuss. Been prodding me about making an investigation of that killing. I thought he's left town till I met him outside a minute ago."

Anderson and Thorpe looked sharply at Morton's back, their eyes speculative. Belle thoughtfully watched the two men. Quigley just stood there tugging at one end of his droopy moustache.

"Is that so?" murmured the gambler.

"Inquisitive sort of a jigger, huh?" commented Anderson.

"Sure is," said Quigley. "I thought him and Sam Trench would come to blows a couple of times."

"You vultures stop picking that cowboy to pieces," said Belle peremptorily. "He looks pretty good to me. Come on, John—I'll introduce you to Sally Burke."

The pair made their way across the dance floor toward the dais near the rear door where the two regular musicians, a pianist and a violinist were getting ready to resume playing cowboy and frontier tunes. Quigley looked around and then wandered off. Thorpe leisurely made his way to the bar with the intention of joining Maxwell and Morton.

Morton had just set down his empty whiskey glass and was speaking as the gambler approached.

"You told me to hunt you 'up if I changed my mind about that job, Maxwell," he said casually. "I've been thinking your proposition over since morning."

"Oh, that," said Maxwell, sipping his own liquor. "Guess I was talking ahead of myself, Morton. As one gent to another I'll ask you to forget what was said."

•Morton was faintly surprised. "You mean you don't want to hire me, after all?"

Maxwell placed his empty glass down on the counter and looked squarely at Morton. "Frankly, I don't," he said.

"But that problem you told me you had," pointed out Morton. "It still isn't solved."

"You're not the man for it." Maxwell's tone grew a bit curt. "I've changed my mind. Oh, hello, Thorpe."

"Hello," said Thorpe to Maxwell, his keen blue eyes on Morton. "Let's have a drink on the house. What'll it be stranger?"

"Two fingers of rye," said Morton, accepting.

"Meet Morton," said Maxwell. "Morton, this is Faro Thorpe, owner of this gilded palace of sin."

"Glad to know you, Morton," said Thorpe. "I've heard of you."

Moreton did not bother to mention that he had also heard of the gambler. "Nice place you have here, Mister," was all he said.

The bartender set out a whiskey bottle and an extra glass for Thorpe, and they all three drank.

"Staying in town long?" asked Thorpe.

"Don't reckon so, now," answered Morton, glancing at Maxwell.

"Well, make yourself at home here," Thorpe invited pleasantly "Ladies in the dance hall, drinks here—and if you play cards, you'll find some amusement in the back room."

"Thanks," said Morton.

The two men left him, talking together as they strolled away. Morton thoughtfully watched their departure. So Maxwell had grown leery of him and had shut the job door right in his face. Which simply meant he would have to employ other ways of checking up on the mining company.

He wondered if any of the men here were wearing a different hat than the one they had worn earlier tonight. If so, it would give him some inkling of just whose hat the Dark Knight had been forced to shoot off in order to keep the owner from being killed by the drygulcher.

After a few dance tunes there was a brief pause in the other room, and then the soft strains of a piano came floating through the archway. It was an old favourite ballad, and

Morton made his way to the dance hall. As he entered, a sweet, girlish voice was lifted in song.

"Believe me, if all those endearing young charms
That I gaze on so fondly today
Were to flee by tomorrow and fade in my arms
Like fairy gifts fading away"

His heart touched, Morton walked on toward the dais where Sally Burke was playing and singing while John Anderson leaned on the piano, watching and listening.

"Who's the red-headed cowboy?" Morton asked Belle Howard as he passed her.

"That's John Anderson," said Belle. "Don't worry, Morton. I wouldn't introduce anybody to that girl who isn't fit to talk to her."

"Anderson's the feller who goes gunning for Abe Meade when he's in his cups, isn't he?"

Belle looked at him strangely, a question in her brown eyes. "You are a curious somebody, Morton. Better not start probing into Anderson's habits. He hates the very ground Abe Meade walks on."

"I thought he loved the ground and it was just Meade himself he hated," said Morton dryly.

Belle caught her breath, her eyes sparkling in appreciation. "Somewhat of a wit, too, aren't you?"

"In a sort of half way," replied Morton. "But thanks for the advice. Won't cause any fireworks if I just sort of sidle up and meet him, will it?"

Belle laughed. "Come on," she said, giving in.

Just as they reached the dais Sally's slim fingers made a discord as they struck the wrong keys and her voice broke.

"Thou wouldst still be adored, as this moment"

She bowed her head against the music rest and began sobbing uncontrollably. She had tried so hard to be brave, but "IF ALL THOSE ENDEARING YOUNG CHARMS" had been her father's favourite song.

Swiftly Morton sprang up on the dais and bent over the girl before anyone else could move, his broad back to the rear door. Thus it was that he failed to see the barrier open stealthily and two men barely cross the threshold. Their neckerchiefs pulled up high about their mouths, and their hats were

pulled low. In the shadows there they were unrecognizable. But the six-gun in the hand of one and the glittering knife held by its tip in the right hand of the other were definitely not anonymous.

As Morton spoke comfortingly to the sobbing girl, the man with the knife drew back his arm and snapped it forward in a dexterous motion. Like a beam of light the weapon flashed across the end of the room, aimed unerringly at the centre of Morton's back.

Belle Howard uttered a helpless little cry of warning, but it was John Anderson who sprang to life. Snatching up the first thing that came to hand, he lunged forward and interposed the object between Morton's shoulders and the flying knife. With a thud and splintering sound the weapon crashed into the fiddler's violin, arrested in its flight just an inch from the intended victim's body.

Even before the uproar of shots and cries, Morton was in action. He whirled about in a crouch, his two guns appearing like magic in his hands. He snapped a pair of shots at the gaping back door just as the two assassins rushed out into the night. Then, and then only, he paused to look at the shattered violin with its captured knife in the red-headed rancher's hand. He didn't bat an eye.

"Thanks, friend," he said to Anderson. "That's one I owe you. And I always pay my debts. Did you see who it was?"

"Only that there was two of 'em," answered Anderson, wrenching the knife from the ruined violin and handing the musical instrument back to its owner, who looked decidedly unhappy about the whole thing. "Hummm, this is a mule skinner's knife."

"Hold onto it," said Morton. Then, to the spluttering fiddler: "I'll buy you a new fiddle, feller. I'll be back."

And he started for the back doorway at a run.

"Hey, wait, you crazy fool," yelled Anderson, following. "I'll go with you."

Belle put her arms around the trembling Sally as they both stared after the two men.

"I don't reckon that pair of gents need a better introduction to each other," said Belle. "They seem to work together right well."

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CHAPTER SIX

By the time Morton and Anderson reached the alley behind the dance hall it was deserted, a place of lonely shadows in the pale starlight. The two would-be assassins had completely disappeared. There was no sound of galloping hoofs, so it was obvious that the murderous pair had simply pulled down their neckerchiefs and mingled with the people on the streets. They could have entered any one of the places open for business and lost themselves easily. They could have circled the Palace and come right back in through the front, with nobody the wiser.

"You go one way, pard, and I'll go the other," suggested Anderson. "We'll meet in front."

"No use, Anderson," said Morton. "We'd never find them now."

"Maybe you shot one of 'em."

"I'm afraid not. We might as well go back into the dance hall."

"All right," agreed Anderson. "You take it coolly enough. You oughta know who's gunnin' for you. Haven't you any idea?"

"Just an idea," admitted Morton.

"This has been a busy evenin' for drygulchers," said the owner of the PDQ. One of them shot my hat off on the road not far from my ranch tonight."

"You get him?" Morton asked, startled to find that Anderson was the man whose life he had probably saved.

"Nope," said Anderson. "Didn't even try. For all I knew he might have been twins or triplets, so I didn't linger to find out. Stopped off at the ranch and got me another hat and headed for town."

Morton was trying to think who had attempted to kill him with the knife. The first logical suspect he could think of was Henry Maxwell. Maxwell had talked too much before making sure of his man, and Morton knew that the mine manager

regretted this. He might have good reason to dispose of the nosy and curious stranger. On the other hand there was Faro Thorpe, who had been in company with Maxwell the last time Morton had seen both men. But there was no reason for Thorpe to be interested in Morton's activities. Nevertheless, there had been two killers. They could easily have been Maxwell and Thorpe.

However, the very fact that there had been two men made Morton remember that two men had killed Stanley Burke in a guntrap. It was quite possible the same duo of killers had made the attempt on his life. That John Anderson could have been behind the deed was implausible. In the first place he couldn't have known Morton was particularly interested in him, and why arrange a killing if he was going to circumvent it with a fiddler's violin?

This left Sam Trench as another possible suspect. Trench could have known of the trap to kill Meade, and he had certainly made it plain he felt Morton was taking too lively an interest in the proceedings. Further, there was a growing antipathy between the two of them. But why kill Morton for it?

Of them all, Maxwell seemed the most likely culprit. At the same time, it could simply have been the two Burke killers who had learned that Morton was agitating things and acted on their own.

All these thoughts raced swiftly through Morton's brain as he and Anderson re-entered the Palace. They met Marshal Quigley at the rear door.

"What's all this knife-throwing ruckus?" demanded Quigley, as if he considered what had happened a personal affront.

"Your guess is as good as ours, Marshal," answered Morton calmly. "Seen anything of Maxwell and Thorpe lately?"

"Yeah. They're in the card room back of the saloon—or they was until the excitement brought 'em out," said the marshal. "You catch either of the killers?"

"Nope," said Anderson. "Couldn't find hide nor hair of 'em."

"Lemme see the knife," said Quigley, and Anderson handed it over.

It was a keen-bladed, stag-handled hunting knife such as

many men carried. There was neither mark nor initial by which to identify it.

"Hummm—such a knife as dozens of freighters, miners and cowboys carry," observed Quigley. "I don't recognize it."

"I didn't suppose you would," said Morton dryly, taking the knife and thrusting it beneath the belt of his levis. "I reckon I inherit it since it was intended for me. It's all I got to show for fifty dollar worth of fiddle I have to pay for."

Quigley squinted at him, tugging at one corner of his moustache, and there was something about the marshal's expression that reminded Morton of a friendly bull-moose.

"Figure you don't understand my position, Morton," said Quigley. "I'll set you straight right now. Maybe I don't seem so anxious to dig into things which happen outside of town, but lemme tell you I'm plenty interested in what takes place right here in my own bailiwick."

"You surprise me, Marshal," said Morton, and he meant it.

"Don't let your amazement overcome you," said Quigley dryly. "I ain't dropping this knife investigation just because I don't know whose knife it is. You or anybody else who starts trouble in Sand Wells will find out there's law here. Now, describe them two polecats to me."

Anderson obliged with a sketchy description of the pair. "One wore tan chaps. The knife thrower was dressed in plain work clothes, and I think he had on laced boots. I didn't see 'em good, but they were regular sized men. I'd say one was a cowboy and the other a miner, although they both had bandannas hiding the lower part of their faces."

"Anything to add, Morton?" Quigley asked as Anderson stopped talking.

"Nothing about the two coyotes, Marshal, but something about you," said Morton, his tone friendly. "I begin to believe you're an honest lawman who takes his job seriously. I apologize for thinking otherwise."

"Of course," said Anderson. "Matt's as honest as a lead steer—and just as dumb."

"Stop it, both of you," said Quigley with a grin. "I can't stand flattery—just never been halter-broke to it."

They went on into the dance hall where Thorpe and Maxwell were talking with Belle Howard and Sally Burke. Having already eliminated the two men as being possible active

participants in the attempted knifing, Morton produced a slim roll of folding money and started to pay the fiddler for his ruined instrument.

Thorpe quickly intervened. "None of that, Morton," he said. "The house will pay for the damage. It's the least I can do. And thanks, Anderson, for being so handy. I won't forget this. Either of you have any idea who made the attack? You have any enemies trailing you, Morton?"

"Not that I know of."

"Perhaps you were mistaken for somebody else. Your back was turned toward the door, I understand," went on Thorpe.

"That was likely it," agreed Morton in faint irony. "Being killed by mistake seems a prevalent practice in these parts." He glanced at Maxwell.

A faint smile about his lips, Thorpe followed Morton's look. But Maxwell was paying scant attention. He did not have the air of a guilty man as he talked to the woman and the girl. Belle was listening intently, apparently fascinated by every word the mining company manager said. Sally was polite, but there was sadness in her dark eyes and she appeared pale and wan.

Morton noticed that the gambler's smile faded as he observed how deeply interested Belle and Maxwell appeared in each other, and he shrewdly deducted that the two men had found a mutual interest in the queen of the dance hall. Apparently unaware of this undercurrent Belle joined in the general conversation.

"Sally wants to go back to the hotel," she said. "Which of you gentlemen is going to escort her?"

Morton opened his mouth to offer, but the red-headed Anderson beat him to it. Springing to the girl's side and tucking her hand gallantly under his arm, the owner of the PDQ outfit stated that he would do so. There was adoration in Anderson's eyes as he looked at the pretty little brunette, and Morton realized another romance bade fair to start blooming.

"We'll both go," he said quietly. "I'd like to meet Miss Sally's mother myself."

"I'd like that," said Sally, smiling at both men. "I'll feel so safe with such brave men protecting me, such as Mr. Anderson and Mr. Morton."

"Call me Johnny," said Anderson. "All my friends do." He smiled a bit ruefully. "At least all the friends I've got left."

"Folks who like me call me Steve," said Morton with a smile, and he looked into Anderson's eyes that were as clear as his own.

"All right, Steve," said Anderson. "Come on along."

"How about your usual card game, Anderson?" asked Maxwell jokingly.

"Oh, I'll be back," said the redhead hastily. "The game can wait, far as I'm concerned."

"Of course if you'd rather stay here and play cards, Johnny," said Sally, "please don't let me stop you." She glanced at Morton, radiating all of the Southern charm that was part of her heritage. "I'm sure Steve will see me safely to the hotel."

"Unhuh," said Anderson. "Then I go along just to protect Steve."

"Thought you wanted to get revenge at the gambling table, Anderson," said Maxwell.

"Let him alone, Henry," Thorpe said indifferently to Maxwell. "He gambles too much for his own good. I'm glad to see him develop a more suitable interest."

Morton was surprised to note genuine sincerity in the gambler's tone. Thorpe actually did not want to gamble with Anderson. That attitude was not in keeping with Thorpe's profession. Was Thorpe a bit afraid of Anderson's drunken reactions, and anxious to keep from being implicated in any trouble over Abraham Meade? Or was this suave man in the Prince Albert coat a sentimentalist at heart who approved of young romance? Morton did not know the answer.

With Sally between them, young, fragile and lovely, Morton and Anderson walked to the hotel. There was something so gallant and protective about the attitude of both men that men and women stepped aside to let the trio pass, and smiled as they went by.

John Anderson appeared a bit dazed by Sally's very presence and it made the young rancher taciturn. Morton found it was up to him to make conversation, and he chatted lightly about the quality of food to be found in Sand Wells, careful to shy away from mentioning any of the subjects which closely concerned the three of them.

• "Hello," said Anderson, breaking his silence at the front of the hotel. "Must be holding a town meeting in the lobby."

Such seemed to be the case. A circle of some fifteen or twenty men surrounded the hotel owner, who stood beneath the centre chandelier of flickering kerosene lamps and harangued his listeners. Trench was talking loudly and earnestly, obviously arousing the men about him.

The trio halted just inside the entrance to listen. Sally so close to the two tall men on either side of her that her soft, slender body brushed against their stalwart frames.

"—taken enough from one stubborn old coot," Trench was shouting angrily. "And I say it's high time we took action. Abe Meade's got no right to stand in the way of a whole town and countryside. A right-of-way for a spur railroad line through Eagle Gap won't hurt his spread a bit. But will he allow it? No, sir! He plumb refuses, like a dog in the manger. I say that we citizens have got to take action."

"Meade oughta be tarred and feathered!" shouted one of the listeners.

"You're right, friend," said Trench. "But that isn't enough. Folks have already called on him and tried to make him see the light. What he needs is to have the hell scared out of him. We've got to get up a big bunch of right thinking citizens and go after him—chop him down to size if we have to do it."

Several of the men cheered loudly at Trench's bombastic words. As he listened Morton realized the hotel man was doing right well as a rabble rouser. Just a little more, and the meeting would take on the aspects of a mob. And then Sam Trench dramatically played a trump card.

Coming down the stair at this moment was a slender and pale middle-aged woman. She had the same dark eyes and proud bearing of Sally Burke. Her black hair, done high on her head, was streaked with grey.

"Mother!" exclaimed Sally quickly. "She is worried about me."

Sam Trench, having seen the trio enter the lobby, now caught sight of Mrs. Burke descending the stairs. He flung out one hand, pointing from mother to daughter.

"This trouble has gone beyond plain talk," he thundered. "Only this morning an innocent stranger was shot down and killed up near Meade's place—just because he looked like

Meade. Stanley Burke leaves behind him an invalid widow and a helpless daughter. Who is to blame for this tragedy?"

"Abe Meade!" yelled half a dozen men.

"Exactly!" cried Trench. "For all we know, Meade may have killed this man himself. But no matter who pulled the trigger, Abe Meade is directly responsible for bereaving this woman and her daughter. Matt Quigley can't do anything about it, but as public-spirited citizens we can. What shall we do about it? Shall we stand idly by while innocent men are murdered?"

"No! No! Let's get Abe Meade!" came the shouts of the crowd. "Lynch him!"

It didn't make sense, but a mob never did exercise any reasoning ability. Resentment and anger against Abraham Meade, already running high, needed only a flimsy excuse to fan into a destroying flame. Morton knew that if violence was to be prevented, right now was the moment to break it up. But he was already treading on dangerous ground himself. An attempt had just been made on his own life. Not that this deterred him in the least, but one more action on his part, and Steve Morton would be in such bad repute in town that he could not remain. And Morton had to have freedom of movement.

He glanced at John Anderson, wondering if the red-headed rancher would do anything to interfere. Anderson's face was flushed and he was scowling. But he hesitated. It was obvious that he didn't much care what happened to his enemy, even though he knew this mob action was wrong.

"Well, what are we waiting for?" demanded Trench. "Let's form a vigilante committee and go after Meade!"

Men began milling around, shouting and brandishing guns. Excitement was reaching a high pitch. Morton drew a deep breath and grimly prepared to lock horns with the hotel owner, come what might. But he was spared the necessity of interfering by the lady on the stairs.

Mrs. Burke halted a couple of steps from the bottom of the stairs and looked wildly around as she realized the meaning of Trench's shouted words. She uttered a sharp cry of protest and stood there swaying like a slender sapling in a breeze.

"Oh, no no, Mr. Trench," she protested. "Don't do that. Please don't take any action because of my daughter and me.

You mustn't do violence to Abraham Meade. He's not guilty of anything."

Gradually the hubbub subsided as the angry mob turned to listen, all eyes fixed on the woman on the stairs. Trench's voice cut through the silence, the grim tones of a man still fully determined to have his own way.

"Not guilty?" he thundered out. "Madam, you don't know Abe Meade. He's a crook, a miser, a haughty old hellion, and a killer!" Dramatically the hotel man pointed to Anderson. "He cheated yonder man's father out of the Old Anchor range, and now he's cheating the whole country out of a boom of prosperity. And to cap the climax, he's now killing innocent men and making widows and orphans!"

"Oh, no! No!" cried Mrs. Burke piteously. "That isn't so. It can't be true. Abe never shot my husband. Please, you must listen to me! My husband was going to see Abe on a family matter. Abe Meade and Stanley Burke were first cousins."

"Huh?" exclaimed Trench, his jaw dropping ludicrously. "What's that?"

"My husband and Abe Meade were blood relatives," repeated Mrs. Burke. "That's why they looked somewhat alike. We stopped here in Sand Wells on our way to Colorado just so they could meet. I know Abe Meade had nothing to do with my husband's death!"

This denouement flabbergasted Trench. It left him groping for words. He was conscious of the men around him waiting for him to speak, but he just couldn't think of the right thing to say and so remained silent.

Morton glanced at the girl beside him in amazement.

"Didn't you know your Dad and Meade were kin-folks, Sally?" he asked as Anderson stood intently listening. "You didn't tell us that at the funeral parlor."

"Of course I knew it," said Sally, "But nobody asked me about that. Cousin Abe's name wasn't even mentioned to me. Is he really as terrible as—and as bad as these men make out?"

"He's guilty of everything Trench said," declared Anderson hotly, "except the killing of your father. Even I wouldn't accuse him of drygulching his own kinfolks, and I hate him worse than a rattlesnake."

"Oh, Johnny," cried Sally, drawing away from him in dismay. "I didn't think you——"

Then she uttered a choking little cry and darted across the lobby to the side of her mother.

Morton made a wry expression and looked at Anderson.

"Looks like you split your britches plumb down the back that time young feller," he commented. "That is, if you're cottoning to Sally like I think you are. And when she finds out you ordered a coffin and a headstone for Abe Meade your chances are going to be about zero."

"Who told you about that?" demanded Anderson tersely.

"Is it supposed to be a secret?" countered Morton.

Anderson reddened and twisted uncomfortably. "I was drunk the day I done that," he admitted sheepishly. Then, fiercely, "But I wasn't joking. Some day I'll have to kill Abe Meade."

"I've heard that you do quite a lot of drinking—and gambling," remarked Morton in a casual tone. "Bad business for a young rancher if he wants to make a go of the cattle business."

"That's my own affair, Morton," warned the redhead. "And I don't owe a gambling debt to anybody in the world. I squared off with Faro Thorpe the day before yesterday."

This was news. Morton wanted to ask how, but he dared not. He was beginning to like this reckless young profligate, but he had already said more on short acquaintance than most men could get away with. He looked over to where mother and daughter stood with arms about each other in the midst of milling and gesticulating men talking to Sam Trench.

"Don't reckon we can change the general opinion of Abe Meade," he said, "But now's a good time to help turn the tide away from a necktie party. Ain't that one of your outfit named Joe Blake in the group?"

"Yes, it is," said Anderson in apparent surprise. "Hey. Joe! Joe Blake! You danged fool, we ain't taking any hand in this kind of violence. The PDQ will deal with Abe Meade in its own way."

Blake looked around and then reluctantly left the group and approached his employer. He was a tall, rawboned man, with a thin face and cold grey eyes. He wore the usual range

garb including leather chaps and there was a pearl handled .45 in the holster on his right hip.

The departure of the PDQ waddy from their midst completed the breakdown of the mob behaviour. Surprisingly enough Sam Trench had completely cooled off and was most abject in his apologies to the ladies. There was no more talk of lynching and rope law. Temporarily violence had been averted. Feeling still ran high, but the mob spirit was broken.

As the men dispersed, arguing heatedly among themselves John Anderson diffidently addressed Sally Burke.

"I'm begging your pardon, Miss Sally, for saying anything to hurt your feelings, but I didn't know you felt like this. I got my differences with Abe Meade, but I wouldn't raise a hand to harm him behind his back. You got to believe that, please."

Sally smiled faintly at him, though she had been close to tears. "I want to believe you, Johnny," she said. "This is my mother. And Mother, this is Steve Morton, the other man I told you about."

Mrs. Burke, still trembling from the excitement she had just passed through, greeted both men timidly. Then she expressed a desire to return to her room, and Anderson gallantly joined Sally in helping her up the stairs.

Morton glanced after them and then looked at the still baffled and embarrassed hotel owner. To Morton's discerning eye it was obvious the man was in a quandary of some sort. The news of the Burke relationship to Meade had knocked him back on his heels. Trench recovered himself with an effort as he faced Morton.

"Still hanging around town?" he grunted sourly. "The hotel's filled up, if that's what you want to know, Morton."

"That's as good an excuse as any to get rid of me," said Morton without rancour. "I was just going to ask if Henry Maxwell didn't live here. He told me I'd find him at the hotel."

"He does, and he ain't here now," said Trench shortly.

"Thanks," said Morton, knowing this latter fact better than Trench. "Was he up to the borax mines today, do you know?"

"I don't see how that's any of your business, but he wasn't. He came back yesterday afternoon. Now I got some business to tend to. Hey, Joe!"

Unceremoniously Trench left Morton's side and hastened across the lobby to join Joe Blake near the front entrance. The pair went out into the street together. More slowly Morton followed, idly noting that Joe Blake wore a red silk neckerchief about his neck, and those leather chaps could be considered tan. The gun-toting member of the pair of would-be assassins had worn tan chaps and a red neckerchief. But then so did dozens of other men.

Morton reflected on Trench's change of attitude from a wild rabble rouser to a much milder individual and figured out a possible explanation. If there was any plan afoot to get rid of Abraham Meade as an obstacle by killing him off, matters would be more complicated than ever now.

It was one thing to dispose of a lone person who stood in the way—it was quite another if that person left relatives behind him. If anything happened to Meade now, Sally Burke and her mother would become legal heirs of the Old Anchor spread, and this fact would tie up the right-of-way in a time-killing legal snarl.

Whatever the schemes, the cross-purposes, the angles—whatever the answer might be, Morton decided it was time for him to call on Abraham Meade.

He went out into the night and headed for Bert Kilgore's livery stable to get his roan horse.

CHAPTER SEVEN

IN spite of all the rumours concerning Abe Meade's penury and wealth, the Old Anchor ranchhouse reflected no indications of opulence. The main building, built originally for a line shack by George Anderson and subsequently enlarged by Meade, was a comfortable but ordinary structure consisting of four large rooms.

The barns and corrals were typical of thousands of such buildings throughout the entire West. The fencing was scanty and the tools and equipment were conspicuous by their absence. Ten gallons of paint would have helped immeasurably. Bordering on the rim of the dry and shimmering expanse called Dutchman's Desert, rising almost like a rugged coastline as a barrier to a sea of sand, the Old Anchor spread stretched southward to where it adjoined the slightly better rangeland of John Anderson.

The only logical opening for a trail to and from the desert was the wide and canyon-like gap called Eagle Pass. Through this gently shelving opening a wide trail led down into the desert and wound its way across a mile of sand to the cluster of buildings erected by the Goddard Mining Company.

At the inner end of the pass, to the right side coming in, Abe Meade had built a small shack as a sort of toll-house. There was a single chair in the small shed and a sloping shelf on which reposed a ledger. Tied to the shelf was a heavy black lead pencil. There was no gate-keeper. There was no gate. All freighters from the mines were supposed to stop and mark down in the ledger entry of their passing with a load. Once a month Meade and Maxwell went over the ledger and had a settlement.

Southward the trail ran in a fairly straight line, almost bisecting the Old Anchor range and then angling across a section of the PDQ range as it led across country to Sand Wells. Although in daily use, the trail did not pass in sight of the home buildings of either ranch. Thus it was easily possible

for a man to be killed on the trail and nobody on the ranches to be aware of it.

Meade had only three men working for him, two cowhands and a slightly crippled oldster named Limpy Logan who was the cook. Limpy was a salty old codger who had once been a trail drover on the Chisholm Trail from Texas to Kansas. No longer able to ride and rope, he had been hired by Abe Meade because of past friendship. There wasn't enough stock or work to keep more than the other pair of hands busy.

All in all, the Meade ranch presented the picture of a two-bit affair. Were it not for the freighting contract with the borax company and his rent gold strike, Meade would have been in rather sorry condition.

This was the set-up that Eagle Wing rode into and hit the old man Meade up for a job along about twilight, of the same day the Navajo and the Dark Knight had parted. The four men on the place were getting ready for supper when the Indian boy rode into the dooryard. Meade did not stir out of his heavy chair at the end of the dinner table when Eagle Wing halloed the house.

"Light down and come in!" Meade yelled in answer. "The door's wide open."

Eagle Wing did so, leaving his grey ground-hitched in front of the ranchhouse. He halted on the threshold respectfully. He noticed the lean and rangy appearance of the two cowboys flanking the old man, and recognized the cook for a hard-bitten ex-cowboy as he limped back and forth from the kitchen with bowls of food.

Meade himself was quite impressive. Fully six feet and some inches tall, he was portly without being fat. His hair was a bushy mane of grey. His features were craggy and sunburnt. His eyes were steel grey and sharp as gimlets, undimmed by any sign of encroaching age. His mouth was a wide, thin gash across his face. It would have been friendly and humorous had it not been for the general air of lordliness and arrogance about the man which overshadowed every other feature. He wore his worn range clothes with all the grace of a scarecrow, and there was an old single action, long barrelled Colt in the holster on his right hip.

"Blast my britches!" roared Meade in amazement as he stared at Eagle Wing. "An Injun grubline rider! Well, don't

stand there like a roped steer. Come in and set down. Limpy, get another plate and eatin' tools. Every man is welcome to grub at the Old Anchor."

"Unless he works for Goddard and Maxwell," cackled Limpy Logan dryly.

"Shut up, you spavined old coyote!" roared Meade, his eyes flashing angrily. "Want to spoil my supper? Well, redskin? Are you goin' to set down?"

"Thank you very much, Senor," responded Eagle Wing, advancing and sitting on the bench beside one of the lanky cowboys. "My name is Little Badger."

"I didn't ask your name, did I?" thundered Meade, and the way he raved and ranted made Eagle Wing wonder if the man ever spoke in a normal tone of voice. "Nobody cares here what is a man's handle or the colour of his skin I said for you to set and eat."

"Si, Senor," said Eagle Wing meekly, falling in with the regal order of things.

"That's better," rumbled the old autocrat as the Indian boy silently filled his plate and started eating. "Settin' next to you is Gabe Harper. Across the table is Bronc Wilcox. Two of the hardest ridin' and straightest shootin' galoots who ever come outa Texas." Meade nodded toward the cook. "That garrulous old fool is Limpy Logan. He talks too much, but he rods this outfit when I ain't around."

"Yes, Senor," said Eagle Wing, acknowledging the introductions and politely noting the old man did not trouble to mention his own name. A king did not introduce himself.

The three men mumbled greetings, and the meal began. It was finished in comparative silence. No one spoke unless the old man at the head of the table spoke first. In such surroundings this courtly etiquette was almost ludicrous. But nobody laughed. Nobody thought it strange.

After consuming a hearty meal, Abe Meade polished it off by quaffing a full cup of black and scalding hot coffee.

"There!" he said with a gusty sigh. "That's the way a he-man from Texas drinks coffee. Strong as panther-milk, and hot as the hinges of Hades. Now then, Redskin Little Badger, you stayin' the night?"

"If you have room, Senor. Otherwise, I can camp out on the range."

"Abc Meade always has room," thundered the old hellion. "You savvy Spanish, Badger?"

"Si, Senor," replied Eagle Wing quickly. "*Habla Espanol.*"

"Well, don't hobble it here," ordered Meade. "We speak plain United States. Remember the Alamo! Texas! God bless her!"

At these words he proudly bowed his head, and the other three men solemnly did likewise. Eagle Wing discreetly lowered his own black-thatched pate. This act of obeisance must have found favour in the king's sight, for the old hellion went on in a softer manner.

"There's plenty of room to bunk you, Little Badger," he said. "You'll find an extra bunk out in the bunkhouse with Harper and Wilcox."

"Thank you, Senor. I——"

"Mr. Meade!" The old man roared his correction. "No more of that 'Senor' stuff. I ain't any Don Looseface."

"Yes, Mr. Meade," said Eagle Wing dutifully. "And if you can use extra hand. Little Badger will gladly work for keep for short time."

"What? An Injun lookin' for work?" roared out the old man.

"The Millennium's at hand." Then in a quieter voice, "Sorry, Little Badger, there ain't any extra work on the Old Anchor. Not enough cattle to keep two hands busy."

"How about new gold mine, Sen—Mr. Meade?" asked Eagle Wing. "I have worked in mines. I can help you there."

"Hey?" rumbled the old man in deep suspicion, while his three Texas employes eyed the Indian boy truculently. "Who said anything about workin' a gold mine?"

"But rumour in Sand Wells was of gold strike," explained the Navajo.

"Ah! And you come sneakin' along, thinkin' to do some claim jumpin', eh?" growled Meade.

"No, Senor," protested Eagle Wing. "Little Badger just hear talk. Little Badger just want to help. I herd cattle, mend saddles, work in mine—do anything you need good hand for."

"What were you doin' in Sand Wells?" demanded Meade harshly.

Harper and Wilcox placed their hands on the butts of their guns while Limpy Logan limped over to flank Eagle Wing.

It was a ticklish moment, and the Indian boy sensed the hostile tension his innocent words had caused. But his face showed no sign of uneasiness as he shrugged and answered calmly.

"Town was in way on trail. I ride through it. Pick up gossip in front of mine office. Just want to pay for keep."

There was a moment's strained silence as the old rancher considered the Indian boy's words, his gimlet eye all the while boring into Eagle Wing's steadfast black orbs. Then the old man made a motion with his hand, and his three salty Texans relaxed.

"The mine ain't bein' worked—yet," he said sourly. "You can hang around tomorrer and mend some harness and boots if you want."

And that was the way the evening ended. Eagle Wing found himself virtually a prisoner between Harper and Wilcox when he went out to the bunkhouse to bed. He smiled to himself at the thought of how easily he could have given the cowboys the slip during the night and got free if he had so desired.

But the morning sun found him peacefully falling in with the ranch work. He knew he could not leave until the Dark Knight had contacted him, unless Meade drove him away. So after breakfast he went to work mending bridles and boots under the watchful eye of Limpy Logan while the two cowboys rode out onto the range. Abe Meade was busily fussing with his ledgers in his living-room office.

It lacked an hour to noon when Harper and Wilcox came riding in together. As they rushed into the house, Limpy Logan jerked his head at Eagle Wing and got to his feet.

"C'mon, Little Badger," said the cook. "Let's go up to the house. You can finish that job after dinner."

Nothing loath, Eagle Wing laid his mending work aside and followed the cook to the main house. They got there in time to hear the two riders making their reports.

"Mr. Meade," said Harper, "three of them danged freighters come through the pass this mornin' and didn't stop to register their loads. I was combin' the west section for strays when I saw 'em. I sat my horse right above Eagle Pass and seen 'em drive on through bold as brass. I was too far away to stop 'em, but I can ride after 'em if you want and bring 'em back."

Abraham Meade's brow clouded angrily. Then it cleared.

"Danged sidewinders!" he bellowed. "I ought to hosswhip every one of 'em. But never mind losin' any good workin' time chasin' sneaks. I'll put it down. Maxwell keeps tally on the loads, too. He's a hard man to do business with, but he's honest enough. No use gettin' riled over that."

"You'll get plenty riled over this," said Wilcox. "I rode down to the desert water holes and I found them miners had cut our wires again and drove their mule stock in for water."

"What?" yelled Abe Meade, jumping as though he had been prodded with a hot poke. "Why, them dirty buzzards! I warned Maxwell I'd shoot the next man to cut through that fence. Them water holes belong to the Old Anchor, and he'll pay me for any water he hauls back to the mines."

"He'll pay plenty for this mornin's water," said Wilcox significantly. "Two of his mules got bogged down in that patch of quicksand at the north hole. If they don't find them jassacks soon, they won't never find 'em."

"Huh? Two mules bogged down?" said Meade quickly. "You mean you left 'em in that fix?"

"Sure," said Wilcox, shrugging. "Why not? They're God-darn jassacks."

"You locoed imitation of a Texas cowboy," roared Abe Meade in high anger. "Them jassacks ain't to blame. They're just dumb animals. Besides I wouldn't let any man's stock suffer, no matter what troubles I got with the man himself. You fork your bronc and skeedaddle right back out there and pull them mules out of that muck. Gabe Harper, you go along and help."

The two cowboys didn't linger, it was obvious that Abe Meade was not in a mood for any argument. Harper and Wilcox left the ranchhouse, got their horses and rode away. Meade glared at the cook and the Indian boy as he grew conscious of their presence.

"What the devil do you two want?" the old man roared. "Never heard I was so pretty folks had to stand around just lookin'."

"Calm down, Boss," said Limpy Logan. "There you go gettin' your self in a sweat again over nothin'. You bite my head off just one more time and I quit."

"Huh? Why you——" Meade broke off, and suddenly

looked anxious. "You wouldn't really do that, would you, Limpy?"

"Why not?" demanded the old cook. "You do so much yelling around here that it gives me an earache."

"But you can't leave," protested Meade. "There ain't another man within five hundred miles knows how to cook food Texas style, like you do. I wouldn't give a dime a dozen for these New Mexico cooks."

"Calm down, Abe," said Limpy with a grin. "I haven't quit yet—just was kinda warnin' you, that's all. Me and Little Buzzard here figured there was something wrong, the way Bronc and Gabe rode in, so we come to see what the excitement was about."

"That's different," said Meade mildly. "I got work to do so you go tend to your own jobs."

He settled down at his desk and Limpy and Eagle Wing left the house. The Indian boy returned to his task of repairing saddles and bridles, while the cook went to get the midday meal ready.

The two cowboys did not return from their work on the range, which was not unusual. A cowboy didn't often bother to get back to the ranch for a meal in the middle of the day, they usually drifted in late in the afternoon and waited for supper.

Eagle Wing finished working with the leather and wandered into the kitchen to learn what he was to do next.

"You can start peeling some potatoes for supper," said the cook in answer to the Indian boy's question. "I won't need 'em now, but we might as well have 'em ready."

Eagle Wing sat in a chair at a table in the ranchhouse kitchen and started working on the potatoes with a small knife that Limpy gave him. The cook was in a talkative mood.

"Sure wish Abe Meade would listen to me," he said. "Why, I keep tellin' him he's gettin' the dirty end of the stick, in this deal with the Goddard outfit. If he ain't careful Maxwell will talk Abe into turning over that land through the pass for practically nothin' for a spur right-of way, and——"

"Limpy!" bellowed Abe Meade from the living room. "Shut up! You talk too danged much with your mouth. Send Tiny Duck back out to the tack room and fix me some dinner."

"Yes, sir," yelled the cook promptly. Then, in a low voice

to Eagle Wing, "You can finish peelin' them spuds first, 'but don't waste no time. And you can take the peelings out to the chickens."

A few minutes later Eagle Wing carried the pan of potato parings out with him. There was a smile about his lips as he emptied it for the few scrawny hens to cackle and fight over. A hoarse, stern voice made him stiffen and wheel to stare toward the rear corner of the nearest shed.

"What for you smile so big, Chief?"

There, at the corner of the shack, stood the Dark Knight.

"Senor!" exclaimed Eagle Wing delightedly. He put down his pan and walked swiftly toward his patron. "Senor. I have something to report."

They stood there behind the shed while Eagle Wing rapidly related all that he had seen and heard since coming here to the Old Anchor. The Dark Knight listened in silence, slightly nodding his head at times.

"That's good, Wing," he said approvingly when the Navajo boy had finished. "When you leave here go to town and hang around the Mexican cantina to wait for mt. While you're there, see what you pick up about a miner who's a knife thrower and a cowboy in tan chaps and a red neckerchief who tried to drygulch Steve Morton last night." And he swiftly gave the Indian the details of his own experience.

Eagle Wing's eyes began to glitter. "Shall I kill hombres when I find them, Senor?" he asked grimly.

"No, Wing," answered the Dark Knight in a grave voice. "Just find them if you can. And when you do—I think you'll have found the men who killed Stanley Burke."

"Bueno. What you do now, Senor?"

"Right now I think it's time to have a talk with Abe Meade. From what you tell me, he doesn't know yet what has happened."

"He is in living-room of ranchhouse, Senor. I will keep cook from getting nosey."

CHAPTER EIGHT

A SLIGHT sound on the threshold caused Abraham Meade to look up quickly, suddenly wary and alert. He froze in that position, his lower jaw sagging open when he saw a masked man in black sombrero and black cloak standing in the doorway.

"What in tarnation's this?" he managed to gurgle out. "I thought the James boys was operating in Missouri and Kansas."

"Take it easy, Abraham Meade," said the Dark Knight in the strange, cold voice that was so unlike the low drawling tones of Steve Morton. "I'm not a road agent. Maybe you've heard of me?"

"Why—why—yes!" exclaimed Meade, recognition dawning in his eyes. "You must be—the Dark Knight!"

"That's what they call me," admitted his visitor, slowly entering and approaching the table behind which the old rancher sat.

"What in heck do you want with me?" demanded Meade arrogantly. "I ain't robbin' anybody, and I sure as blazes didn't send for you."

"What you do remains to be learned, Meade," said the Dark Knight in a grim voice. "But I came here to talk to you about another matter. What do you know about Stanley Burke?"

"Who?" asked Meade sharply. "Stan Burke? He's in Shrevesport."

"His body lies dead in Snodgrass' funeral parlor in Sand Wells," stated the Dark Knight.

For an instant the old man stared at him as though unable to believe his own ears. The black-clad man waited silently for the import of his words to sink in.

"What?" said Meade finally and for once the old hellion was groping for the right thing to say. "You're locoed! I wrote Burke at Shrevesport only last month."

"He was killed on the borax trail just south of here yesterday morning," went on the Dark Knight, and such was the conviction in his tone that Meade found himself listening intently to every word. "He must have been on his way to see you. His widow and daughter are stranded right now in Sand Wells."

Meade didn't want to admit what he had just heard could be true, even to himself. Stanley Burke had been his nearest of kin, and at heart the old rancher was a lonely man who clung to those who were his own people. Thus it was that when he did speak he was trying hard to blot out what this masked man had said by the old arrogance and bluster.

"I don't believe you," cried Meade, his eyes going wide with horror. "It ain't so." Like the talons of an old buzzard the fingers of his right hand opened and closed above the black butt of the gun in the holster on his right thigh. "Tell me what you know, or I'll shoot your heart out before you can draw them shootin' irons of yours."

"Don't make any sudden moves, Mr. Meade," said the Dark Knight, and it was the cold warning of one who knew there were few men who could actually beat him to the draw. "You're not very popular in this part of the country nowadays. Nothing much would be done about anybody who killed you."

"You black devil!" Meade tried to utter his usual roar, but his words came out in a strange sort of whisper. "Is that a threat?"

"No, merely a warning," said the Dark Knight. "Just shut up and listen. I'll give you the details of what's happened, and then you answer a few questions."

"Fair enough," said Meade, taking his hand away from his gun. "Since you put it that way. Go on."

Quickly the Dark Knight gave all the known details about the killing of Stanley Burke, omitting only his own examination of the murder spot and his subsequent deductions. The old rancher sat there in stricken silence throughout the recital.

"Now then," concluded the Dark Knight, "what business did Burke have with you?"

Abe Meade stirred and sighed. "I reckon he was comin' here to get the money I promised him," he answered heavily. "The crazy fool. I wrote him to stay in Shreveport until I could raise it and send it to him."

"What money?" demanded the Dark Knight.

"Money to take Mary—his wife—to Colorado for her health. He wrote and asked to borrow money, and I promised it to him. But I had to get it first. Good God, poor Mary and Sally! I got to go to town at once and get 'em. I've got to give Stan a decent burial. I——"

"Hold on!" ordered the Dark Knight as Meade rose from his chair. "It's as much as your life is worth for you to go to Sand Wells. Feeling is running high against you."

"Who cares a hoot in hell about that?" snarled Meade. "I got to take care of my own flesh and blood."

"Have you no idea who might have killed your cousin—if he was mistaken for you?" demanded the Dark Knight.

"Certainly," said Meade promptly. "Hank Maxwell. I filed on a gold claim just in time to keep him from gettin' a strip of my range condemned for a railroad right-of-way." The old man's rugged face contorted in a weird mask of hate. "That dirty rattlesnake. Now I'll go gunning for him sure enough. But first I got to go to town."

"You don't think John Anderson could be mixed up in this?"

Meade snorted. "That young rannihan? I never had any truck with him. All he's got time to do is drink and gamble off what little his Dad left him."

"He's threatened to kill you for the trimming you gave his father. He's even paid for a coffin and headstone for you."

Meade's rage became majestic. "Why, the rambunctious" young jughead. I'll stuff him in that box his own self. I'll——"

"Wait!" interrupted the Dark Knight. "Just what was the deal between you and An' rson's father?"

Abe Meade calmed down and stared at his visitor. It was obvious that answering questions for other men went against the grain, but he mastered himself slowly.

"It ain't none of your business, Dark Knight," he said mildly, for him, "but I'll tell you. I ran up a bill of five thousand dollars against George Anderson, workin' and prospectin' for him over a period of nigh on to four years. He didn't have the money, so I agreed to take the north half of his ranch in settlement.

"There was one foolish condition I agreed to. If, any time, within five years, George or his son could raise the money to

pay off the debt to me the Old Anchor goes back to the Anderson family. That was three years ago. There's two more to run. Which don't bother me any. Young Anderson couldn't raise five thousand dollars in five thousand years the rate he's goin'. But meantime I can't sell or give this place away. I got to hold it sort of in trust for two more years."

"Is this deal in writing?" asked his sombrely-clad visitor.

"Sure. It's plumb legal."

"Has it occurred to you that young Anderson might get backing somewhere now and buy the property back in order to gain possession of your new gold mine?"

"Wouldn't do him any good. I filed on the mineral rights of the land in my own name just recent. He'd get the range and I'd keep the gold mine."

"But suppose you were to die suddenly—like Stanley Burke?"

"My heirs would get the mine."

"Now, yes. But suppose somebody planned to kill you before they knew you had any relatives?"

"Are you tryin' to make me believe that John Anderson's the man who killed Stanley Burke?" demanded Meade, looking at the Dark Knight in surprise.

"No. Not at all, because frankly I don't believe he had anything to do with it. But you must take all angles into consideration. For instance, in view of this agreement you had with George Anderson, how can you sell the borax people a right-of-way at any price?"

"I won't sell," stated Meade bluntly. "I'll only lease 'em a right-of-way at my price. And that's what's holdin' up the deal. They won't meet my figures." He frowned impatiently. "But I've had enough of this foolish talk. I got to get to town."

"On the contrary, this talk isn't foolish," said the Dark Knight and the conviction in his tone made the old rancher relax and listen. "Hidden somewhere behind all this tangle is the reason for trying to kill you. Or, at least, the reason before Burke showed up. Unless you've tied to me."

At this remark the old Texan looked as though he were about to explode. He leaped to his feet and came around the table to stare down into the Dark Knight's face from his incredible height, and the Robin Hood outlaw was well over six feet tall himself.

"Look here!" thundered the rancher. "Abe Meade don't lie to no man. I ain't responsible to you and I didn't have to tell you this much, and I ain't goin' to tell you anything more. Now get out of my house and tend to your own ear-markin'. Limpy! Limpy Logan! Hitch up the buckboard for me right now. I'm goin' to Sand Wells."

"Yes, sir," answered the voice of the cook from the kitchen.

"What do you intend doing, Mr. Meade?" demanded the Dark Knight.

"What any decent man would do," roared the old rancher. "I'm bringin' the womenfolks back to this ranch. I'm goin' to give my cousin a decent buryin'. They ain't goin' to plant him in boot hill."

"I'm advising you not to go to Sand Wells," warned the other. "Whether you're right or wrong, practically every man's hand is raised against you. Last night Mary Burke and John Anderson just barely succeeded in breaking up a lynch mob which was gathering to come after you. Stay here, Abraham Meade, and I will help you in this Burke affair."

"I don't need your help, Dark Knight," declared Meade angrily. "And there ain't enough men in Sand Wells to hang me. Confound you, quit hinderin' me!"

"At least take your two cowboys with you."

"I'll do nothin' of the sort," roared the old hellion. "They got work to do, and I'm a whole damn tea party all by myself!"

Seeing he could do nothing further here, the Dark Knight shrugged. It looked as though he had stirred up a hornet's nest in approaching Abe Meade at all. But he did not regret it. He had learned something, and things were slowly falling into place for him. Soon, with any luck at all, he felt that he would ravel out the mystery. And there was still retribution to be dealt out and two women who must be compensated for the tragedy which had befallen them.

As for Abe Meade himself, the Dark Knight had learned that, in spite of his haughty arrogance, the old man had an astonishing sense of fairness. He was not the grasping and selfish villain that everybody seemed to think. And at the same time he was apparently up to something—the details of which remained completely obscured so far. But one thing

was sharply clear. Hell was going to pop in Sand Wells before night.

One thought was uppermost in the Dark Knight's mind. Henry Maxwell had said that he would have the freighter, Hardwick, stop by and notify the Meade outfit of the killing. Why hadn't he done so? Was it because the dead man proved not to be Abe Meade himself, or did the mine manager have an ulterior motive? Surely he had learned last night that Burke was Meade's cousin. Or was he so wrapped up in his pursuit of Belle Howard that he had let other things slide? It didn't seem likely. Henry Maxwell was not a man to let anything, even a pretty woman, interfere with vital business matters.

The Dark Knight went out of the house in company with the irate owner of the Old Anchor. Without speaking another word to his masked companion, Meade stepped into the buckboard and grabbed the reins of the pair of restive mustangs.

"Clean up the house, Limpy," he ordered. "I'm bringin' two ladies home with me."

"Yes, sir," said the cook, scrambling out of the way as he released the bridle of the near mustang. Then he shouted after the old man who was already whipping his team out of the yard. "When will you get back, Abe?"

"As soon as I kill the polecat who shot my cousin," Meade yelled back over his shoulder. And he rattled on down the road in a cloud of dust like a miniature tornado hunting a place to strike.

Eagle Wing, who had helped to hitch the team, looked at the Dark Knight for his cue.

"Go to town at once, Wing," ordered the masked man crisply. "There's going to be trouble."

Limpy Logan approached in time to catch the last word.

"Trouble?" he repeated, eyeing the man in black curiously. "So you're the famous Dark Knight. Well, lemme tell you, Mister, Abe Meade is used to meetin' trouble head on."

"This time he's going to really do it," said the Dark Knight coldly. "I couldn't stop him short of violence. Adios."

He whistled shrilly. There was an answering neigh, and Ebony came galloping around the house. The Dark Knight took three swift strides and vaulted into the saddle as the

great black stallion thundered by. Limpy Logan watched the performance of this feat in admiration. When his eyes had followed the Dark Knight out of sight, he turned to speak to the Indian boy. Eagle Wing had disappeared.

"What in blazes!" muttered the old cook uneasily. "Trouble huh? Always trouble."

He limped on into the house and pulled open a kitchen drawer. Fishing out his cartridge belt and holster, he examined the gun and then strapped the belt around his thin waist. He limped out to the corral to saddle the mare he always rode.

"Trouble, eh?" he repeated: "I got to round up Bronc and Gabe first off. You bet there's going to be plenty trouble if any coyote lays a finger on Abe Meade."

CHAPTER NINE

As he sent Ebony galloping back toward the hideout, which fortunately was nearer town than was the Old Anchor spread, the Dark Knight was grimly conscious of a need for haste. He had to be in Sand Wells by the time Abe Meade got there, or even before the stormy arrival of the old hellion.

While Meade's racing into town alone was foolhardy, it was to be expected by a man who considered himself equal to any and all occasions which might arise. The Dark Knight was forced to admire the old rancher's courage. There was something magnificent in Abe Meade's wrath.

That Meade had scorned the Dark Knight's offer of help, and even brushed aside the suggestion of the black-clad outlaw that the owner of the Old Anchor take his two cowboys to town with him was characteristic of the ageing Texas giant. Abe Meade had fought his own battles all his life, and would doubtlessly continue doing so until the old man breathed his last breath.

It was a credo with which the Dark Knight thoroughly sympathized for, in his way, he was even more of a lone wolf. True, he had Eagle Wing as a trail pard, but it was always the Dark Knight who took command of each and every situation which constantly arose in the hectic lives of these nomads of the dim trails.

As he finally reached the hideout and slid out of the saddle the Dark Knight breathed a sigh of relief. It was not in the sombre garb of the mysterious outlaw that he planned to return to Sand Wells, but as Steve Morton. Only as the wandering cowboy was he known to the citizens of the town, and this would give him more freedom to move and act than would the sudden appearance of the Dark Knight.

He did not appear to hurry as he took off the trappings of the Dark Knight, and placed the hat and cloak in his saddle-roll, nor as he stripped the rigging from Ebony and saddled the hammerhead roan, yet there was not the slightest delay

or wasted motion in anything he did. In a matter of seconds he was wearing his grey Stetson and was ready to ride.

It was late afternoon by the time he rode along the main street of Sand Wells, but he figured that, in spite of his enforced detour, he was far ahead of Abe Meade.

He stabled his horse at Kilgore's place and walked toward the lower end of town. The first thing he wanted to do was establish contact with Eagle Wing, but of the Indian boy he saw no sign. The town seemed quiet—there was a deceptive hush lingering over everything and everyone, like the lull before a violent storm.

Business was picking up gradually at the *Aguila Roja*—the Red Eagle cantina, a mixture of Mexicans and local citizens straggling in and out of the place for wine and the rather coarse entertainment. After sauntering past the dive, Morton went across the street to a little Mexican café for a bowl of chili and beans.

He was still sitting there, contemplating his next move when Eagle Wing came in. The Navajo seated himself at the counter next to Morton without the slightest sign of recognition. He ordered a dish of tamales. Then, as the counterman went back to the greasy kitchen to fill the order, Eagle Wing spoke rapidly out of the side of his mouth.

"I've been in cantina, Senor. Many men come and go. But I was most interested in two men who sit in corner and talk and drink. I could not get close enough to hear, but I learn that one is freighting man called Hardwick and other is PDQ cowboy named Blake. You mentioned those names to me. Perhaps it is odd they are together, Senor?"

"Very odd, under the circumstances," agreed Morton thoughtfully. But I'm not sure it proves anything. You go back and keep an eye on them while I see if Maxwell and Anderson are somewhere in town."

"And if they are, Senor?"

"Maybe we can surprise some information out of the four of them if we manage to herd them together. I'll try to arrange a meeting at Maxwell's office. We must work fast to prevent any more bloodshed."

"Bueno, Senor. You think you had better get town marshal to keep eye on Sam Trench?"

"I don't know. Trench seems to have all the starch take"

out of him for the time being, but if he's mixed up in Burke's killing we'll bring it to light."

Further conversation was interrupted by the return of the Mexican counterman with Eagle Wing's order. Morton paid his bill and went out without a second glance at the Indian boy.

The conviction was growing stronger within him that Hardwick and Blake were the two men who had tried to kill him the previous night. Whether or not they were the pair who had guntrapped Burke he intended to learn as soon as possible. Only by bringing the real culprits to justice could he hope to avert serious trouble between Meade and the entire town.

In spite of his anxiety and need for haste, Morton found no trace of Anderson. If the red-headed young owner of the PDQ was still in town he certainly was keeping out of sight.

Morton finally located Maxwell at the dance hall. The mine manager was visiting with Belle Howard in the almost deserted dance room and doing very well for himself. He scowled and was obviously annoyed when Morton strolled over to where Maxwell and the dance hall hostess were sitting chatting in one corner of the big room. From the cordial way in which Belle greeted Morton it was obvious she was never averse to playing one man against another.

"Still alive and kicking, cowboy?" she said as Morton halted in front of her, and stood with his hat in his hand. "You never have asked me for that dance. You better do it while you're still healthy."

"Thanks, I'll claim that dance soon," said Morton with a smile, and then he deliberately decided to add to the discontent his presence obviously caused Maxwell. "If you think Faro Thorpe won't object."

"Why should he?" Belle demanded in sudden impatience. "He doesn't own me. We're just business partners."

"Suppose I should object, Morton?" asked Maxwell coldly.

"It wouldn't surprise me any," said Morton. "You've been sort of objecting to a lot of things I've done, Maxwell." He grinned. "But there's no hard feelings, I hope."

"I've got news for you, Henry," said Belle. "You don't own me either. If I want to dance with Steve Morton or

anybody else that's my business." The dark-haired woman laughed softly. "And I never said anything truer than that."

"Sorry, Belle," said Maxwell. "I didn't mean to sound over possessive. Let's say I was just carried away by your fascination and charm."

"Let's," said Belle, her dark eyes sparkling. "Even if I don't believe it, I love flattery, Henry."

"To tell the truth I'm not at my best, romantically or otherwise in front of an audience," said Maxwell looking at Morton. "Was there something special you want to see us about now, Morton?"

"I'd like to talk with you a bit, Maxwell," said Morton. "When will you be going back to your office?"

Maxwell glanced out at the street which was beginning to grow dark. "Not tonight," he said, obviously controlling his impatience. "There's no use talking to me, anyway. I told you that last night."

"It isn't the job, Maxwell," Morton said, his blue eyes a bit chilly as he watched the other man. "It's something else."

"What is it?" demanded Maxwell in suspicion.

"About Stanley Burke."

Maxwell scowled at the mention of the dead man, and Belle uttered a little gasp. There was suddenly tension hanging over the trio in the corner of the big dance room. Tension which seemed to grow with the lengthening of the night shadows.

"What about Burke?" Maxwell's voice was a bit harsh as it cut through the silence.

Morton reached into his pocket and drew forth the missing boot heel. Maxwell and Belle watched him as if they felt he had become a magician about to do a remarkable feat of legerdemain. Yet the object Morton held between forefinger and thumb apparently meant nothing to them.

"This is the heel missing from Burke's left boot," Morton said. "Ever see it before?"

For an instant the mine manager stared at the bit of leather apparently weighing his words before he spoke. He looked mildly surprised but not particularly startled.

"I didn't know one of his heels was missing," said Maxwell finally. "Where did you get it?"

"At the spot where Burke was killed—by two drygulchers,"

Morton answered grimly. "You'll note the forty-five calibre slug almost buried in the heel. Burke was shot in the head with a thirty-thirty rifle."

"Oh!" exclaimed Belle. "So that's where you've been today?"

"Frankly, yes," said Morton, deciding a matter of one day wouldn't make any difference in the truth, and knowing nobody save Eagle Wing was aware he had visited the murder spot in the guise of the Dark Knight.

"Why show this evidence to me?" demanded Maxwell. "Why not give it to Marshal Quigley?"

"Mr. Quigley has already stated his position," Morton said evenly. "I thought you were the logical man to see this. By the way, you didn't send Hardwick to notify Meade of Burke's death. He is still hanging around town—in company with a PDQ rider. What sort of a pistol shot is Hardwick?"

Maxwell abruptly got to his feet. It was obvious from the expression on his red face that he was trying to control a seething rage. He stood there glaring at Morton and when he spoke his words were cold.

"You're barking up the wrong tree, Morton," he said, "and you're heading for serious trouble."

"Why?" demanded Morton. "Because I have been trying to investigate the killing of Stanley Burke for the sake of his wife and daughter? If you ask me, you're the one who's making a big mistake, Maxwell. From the way you've just threatened me it sounds like you're anxious to prevent Burke's killers from being found."

"I—I gave you the wrong impression," said Maxwell. "I merely resented the way you seemed to be trying to implicate me."

"I wasn't trying anything of the sort," said Morton. "I merely felt you might wish to discuss the situation further."

"All right," said Maxwell. "If you want to talk to me, I'll meet you at my office in half an hour." His face lighted up as he smiled at the pretty dark-haired woman. "So long Belle. I'll see you later this evening."

"I'll be waiting, Henry," Belle said.

Morton and Belle silently watched as Henry Maxwell strode across the dance floor and out of the big room without once looking back. Then he was gone. Belle looked at Morton, a question in her dark eyes.

"You're a deep man, Morton," she said. "What kind of game are you playing?"

"I'm just sorry for two defenceless women, ma'am," Morton said quietly. "And plumb anxious to see justice done."

She searched his strong face anxiously, and then slowly shook her head.

"You know, I think you're a damned fool for mixing up in this affair without a law badge to back you up," she said frankly. "But the more I see of you the better I like you."

"Putting me in a class with Thorpe and Maxwell?" he asked quizzically.

"I almost wish I could, or even hope you might like me as well as they do," said Belle, "but you're not a woman's man. I knew that the first time I saw you over at the funeral parlor."

"There's always supposed to be the one woman for every man," said Morton.

"If there is, you haven't found her yet." Belle smiled with all the wisdom of a woman of the world. "And I suspect you haven't been looking very hard. You're a strange man, Steve Morton, and a dangerous one. The kind who likes to ride free and fight hard. You wear those two guns of yours as casually as I do my hairpins, and yet they have seen a lot of use. I'd rather be your friend than your enemy, Steve Morton."

"I'd like it a heap better that way too, Belle," said Morton with a grin.

"At least I can assure you of one thing," she said as she rose to her feet. She stood close to him, a tall woman with something regal about her. "You don't have to worry about Sally Burke and her mother. I've got both of them safe upstairs in my quarters, and I'll watch out for them. Maybe it would be better if you went on your way and tried to forget all about this."

"Meaning you figure it would be safer for Henry Maxwell and Faro Thorpe if I weren't around?" asked Morton.

"Safer for those two—hell!" said Belle. "I was only thinking about you, Steve. You had a narrow squeak last night right here in this hall."

"You don't know anything about that?"

"Not a damn thing," said Belle, placing her hands on his shoulders and staring straight into his eyes. "But if I did, I'd be fool enough to tell you."

Before he was aware of her intention, she kissed him firmly on the mouth. Instinctively he put his arms around her and held her soft body close for a moment. She laughed a bit shakily as he released her and she drew away.

"I was so right when I said you're a dangerous man, Steve," she said softly.

Then she silently turned and walked to the stairs near the archway and swiftly ascended, never glancing back.

Morton stared after her, a strange emotion stirring in his breast. That kiss had been a sort of accolade Belle had bestowed on what she considered a brave and gallant man. Steve Morton was both flattered and pleased. Any kiss was an unusual thing to this stern man of the out-trails.

"Belle Howard and Abe Meade," Morton murmured to himself. "A strange pair of people, but both so worth knowing."

Then he put on his hat and went out into the gathering dusk to continue his search for John Anderson.

CHAPTER TEN

WITH the coming of night the town of Sand Wells changed as much in appearance as would a rancher's daughter who had discarded a worn riding outfit for an evening gown. Lights gleamed in windows and doorways all up and down the one and only street of the town. Shadows cloaked the worn, weather-beaten buildings in an air of mystery. What had been merely a squat wooden structure with a false front fastened to the roof in lieu of an upper storey magically grew taller and far more impressive than it had ever been in the light of day.

The Palace Dance Hall and the Sand Wells Hotel dominated all of the other buildings around them now more than ever before. They were big buildings, and in the pale glow of the stars above them they seemed like mastodons out of some pre-historic age towering over the lesser beasts about them.

Men and women strolled along the plank walks, looming for a few seconds in the light of some window or doorway as they passed, and then seeming to fade and blend with the shadows. It was a quiet night, for those who spoke did so in low voices as if conscious of a tension, an unrest in the air that they could not explain.

Steve Morton felt the uneasiness lingering in the town more than probably did anyone else there. He knew the cause of the calm before the storm. Abraham Meade was coming to town.

As he searched for John Anderson all up and down the street Morton found himself waiting for the old owner of the Old Anchor to come dashing into town, the buckboard bounding and swaying and the team of mustangs going at a fast clip.

That Abe Meade had not reached his destination before this was beginning to worry Morton to some extent. Had the old man run into trouble before he even reached town? Was

it possible that he had been drygulched somewhere back along the road as had Stanley Burke?

After giving it a little thought Morton decided the possibility was unlikely. As far as he knew Blake and Hardwick were still in town, he had just talked to Henry Maxwell, Faro Thorpe was still around, for Morton had caught sight of the gambler in his search for Anderson. Sam Trench was at the hotel. Such being the case who was there who might be lingering out along the road to town to try and down Abe Meade? Morton couldn't think of anyone, unless some hireling had been sent to do the job.

"I better stop worrying about Meade and try and find Johnny Anderson," he finally decided. "Where the devil did that crazy redhead get to anyway?"

He continued his search for the owner of the PDQ. Just as he thought his efforts were doomed to failure he saw the red-headed young rancher striding toward him along the high board fence of Snodgrass' undertaking yard.

Morton quickened his step and was just opening his mouth to hail the redhead when his keen eye noticed the yard gate was silently gapping open just behind Anderson's back. There was something sinister in the way that portal left a yawning maw of darkness as it swung out of sight in the shadows.

At the same instant the cry of a mountain lion came from a dark spot across the street. Morton grew tense as he heard the eerie sound, for to him it meant a signal of danger. A call that the Dark Knight and his Indian companion often used in time of peril.

Out of the black shadows loomed a bulky figure. He loomed there in the open gateway of the undertaker's yard, huge and menacing in the darkness that seemed to ebb and flow about him. There was a flash that seemed like molten silver as he raised his arm to bring down a knife into the unsuspecting Anderson's back.

Quick as thought Morton drew his right-hand gun. It came up, long barrel aimed with amazing accuracy at the figure behind John Anderson. The gun roared once, the sound of the weapon's discharge echoing and re-echoing through the tense hush of this deserted section of the long street.

The bullet tore into the attacker's chest, blasting him back

and slamming him against the still swinging gate. The impact of his body caused the gate to creak loudly and then shudder on backwards, letting the attacker drop out of sight in its dark throat.

Anderson's face was a white blur in the shadows, as he stood there startled by the sound of the shot and the slug winging so close by his head. He was instantly on guard, and he halted and dropped into a crouch, swiftly drawing his gun as he looked wildly in both directions. The cry of the mountain lion had merely added to his confusion.

"Take it easy, Johnny," called Morton, running forward. "A feller just tried to knife you, and I had to shoot him."

"Morton!" exclaimed Anderson as he recognized the tall figure that loomed out of the shadows in front of him. He stood there with his gun in his hand. "I wish you'd call your shots, Mister."

"No time to tell you I figured to put the eight ball in the corner pocket," said Morton ironically. "Let's see if we know this hombre I downed."

They reached the threshold of the undertaker's yard together. Guns in hand they advanced, moving slowly, expecting the gun of the man Morton had shot to roar in their faces at any instant. Anderson stumbled over the body of his attacker, eliciting a deep groan. Quickly he struck a match. In the tiny light they saw their foe was badly wounded, and Morton dropped his gun back into the holster.

Anderson struck a second match and held the dim glow to the face of the man lying on the ground. "It's one of Maxwell's men," he exclaimed in amazement.

"Hardwick," agreed Morton laconically. "And look what he was using—a butcher knife."

"Why, the murdering rattlesnake!" Anderson shuddered as he realized how close he had been to death.

Morton glanced up at him and saw the way the redhead's body moved.

"Don't get the shakes now," Morton said. "You saved me from the same thing last night without turning a hair, Johnny."

"You sure paid me back prompt, Steve," said Anderson. "Hey what you doing?"

He struck a third match and cupped it, holding it down to observe Morton's actions. Morton was ripping open the

freighter's blood-stained shirt. He revealed an empty knife sheath at the man's waist.

"Ah!" he breathed. "Just what I thought."

"Hey! What's going on here?" demanded the mournful voice of Ebenezzar Snodgrass. "Who got shot, and how bad?"

"This man tried to get me with a knife, but Morton shot him," said Anderson.

"We can't leave him here," said Morton, getting to his feet. "Help Mr. Snodgrass get him into the house, Johnny. I'll be with you in a minute."

He hurried out of the gateway and ran swiftly across the street to a dark spot between two buildings where he had seen a flash of white. Eagle Wing was waiting for him.

"The two men separated, Senor," the Indian boy explained quickly. "I had to choose which one to follow, so I took Hardwick because he stole butcher knife at cantina. I make mountain lion call when I see you come in time to help stranger. If you not there Eagle Wing throw knife himself," he finished grimly.

"You did right, Wing. I can't have you getting into trouble, too. Did you see Henry Maxwell? He left the dance hall a while ago, and he had time to arrange some sort of trap."

"No, Senor. Hardwick met no one after leaving Blake. He hid in the yard, and I hid over here to watch. Not see Maxwell."

"He's not in his office. At least he wasn't when I last past there. Well, you won't have to watch Hardwick any more. Get on the trail of Joe Blake and freeze to him."

"All right, Senor."

Running back across the street, Morton entered the undertaking parlor to find that the fat little undertaker and Anderson had placed the murderous Hardwick on the davenport. The freighter's eyes were open and he breathed lightly, but it was obvious he was dying.

Morton drew the knife from his belt that had been intended for his back the previous night and approached the couch. Hardwick watched him with apathy as he exposed the knife sheath once more and slipped the knife into the scabbard. It fitted perfectly.

"So it was you who tried to knife me last night, Hardwick," said Morton sternly. "You and Joe Blake. You're a better knife thrower than a pistol shot, aren't you?"

The dying man looked at him blankly. Snodgrass and Anderson crowded closer to see and hear this little drama they did not understand. Morton fished the boot heel from his pocket and held it before Hardwick's eyes.

"You tried to shoot the man you thought was Meade," he said coldly. "You shot off his heel and knocked him down so Blake could come out of the thicket and finish him off with a rifle. And because you were afraid of what I might learn you tried to finish me off last night."

Hardwick's eyelids fluttered and a faint sneer gathered around his pale lips.

"Smart, ain't you?" he whispered.

"Too smart for you," agreed Morton. "Neither you nor Joe Blake have brains enough to plan this whole thing. Who is the man behind you? Who ordered you to kill Abe Meade, and then me? Was it Henry Maxwell?"

"Hey!" exclaimed Anderson. "Joe Blake? Blake's one of my outfit. He——"

"Shut up, Johnny," ordered Morton curtly. "Answer me, Hardwick. You're dying, man. Get this confession off your soul. Why did you try to kill Anderson tonight. Who's your boss?"

But it was too late. Hardwick would never answer another earthly voice. He had died with that faint, enigmatical sneer still on his ugly lips.

"He's gone," said Snodgrass dolefully, after feeling for the pulse. "You made quite a mess of his wish-bone, Morton."

"Why did you open his shirt, Steve?" demanded Anderson with a puzzled frown. "Did you know he had an empty knife sheath on him?"

"To tell the truth, I was looking for something else," said Morton grimly. "But I wasn't surprised. I had already suspected Hardwick and Blake of being the killers."

"Blake. Why do you accuse one of my men?" demanded Anderson in resentment.

"I'll explain it all to you later, Johnny," said Morton. "You wouldn't believe me now, and I haven't any legal proof. First, tell me one thing. You have an agreement executed between your father and Abe Meade three years ago. Where is it?"

"Huh? How did you know about that?" asked Anderson, startled.

"Never mind that now. Where do you keep it?"

"Why, I—I don't have it anymore," faltered Anderson in frowning bewilderment. "I sold it to Faro Thorpe to square off my gambling debt with him."

The answer to the whole bewildering puzzle flashed across Morton's mind at this bit of information.

"Oh, oh!" he said keenly. "You've just told me what Hardwick wouldn't or couldn't, you've told me why you were attacked. They were going to kill you because you were no longer needed in the scheme of things, Johnny. In fact, you might prove troublesome because of your hatred for Abe Meade."

"What in hell are you talking about?" demanded Anderson in complete exasperation.

Morton did not have the chance to explain. The front door slammed open, and Marshal Quigley came trotting into the house.

"I heard the shot," he said curtly, glancing around at the group and then letting his eyes rest on the gory figure on the couch. "A couple of fellers come runnin' to tell me somebody was killed. Ummm—Hardwick, eh? One of Maxwell's crew. Who done it?"

"I shot him, Quigley," said Morton coolly. "He was just about to stab John Anderson. He's one of the men who tried to kill me last night."

"That so?" Quigley tugged at one end of his drooping moustache. "Who said so?"

"I do," said Anderson emphatically.

"All right," agreed Quigley, his tone deceptively mild. "But this has got to be investigated in legal fashion. Want to tell my your side of the story now, Morton, or wait till after I lock you up."

"You're not going to lock Morton up," stated Anderson truculently. "He saved my life and——"

"Let me handle this, Johnny," interrupted Morton, giving him an elbow nudge. He moved over to confront the marshal. "You don't seriously mean you want to throw me into the calaboose, do you, Marshal?" he drawled.

"I don't mean nothing else," snapped the peace officer. "Understand, I ain't saying you won't come clear, but I told you last night that I'm the law in Sand Wells—and this

killing took place in town. I'm locking you up till I can investigate this business plumb complete. I reckon you'll come along peaceable."

"I hate to do this, Marshal," said Morton reluctantly. "But you're just asking for it."

Abruptly his right arm flashed up and a hard fist thudded against Quigley's jaw without the slightest warning. The marshal grunted, jerked, went glassy-eyed, and then folded to the floor like a winded concertina. Before the lawman hit, Morton had whirled to face the other two men.

"You take care of Hardwick, Snodgrass," he said. "Watch your step until I see you again, Johnny. You're in danger. I've got to run. I've too much to do to let Quigley lock me up. Adios for now." And he darted out into the night.

He almost groaned aloud as he saw the buckboard and lathered, steaming team of mustangs that was pulling up in front of the funeral parlor. Abe Meade had arrived in town, and Morton could no longer stay here to avert trouble.

In the funeral parlor Eben Snodgrass and John Anderson looked blankly at each other. The fat little undertaker mopped the bald top of his head and nodded at the prone figure of the peace marshal.

"I knew that Morton was going to cut loose on somebody," he said sadly, "but I thought sure it was going to be Sam Trench."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

ABE MEADE leaped out of his buckboard and stalked into the funeral parlor like an angry lion, the crown of his hat scraping the lintel of the door. That a trace had broken on the off-horse of his team of mustangs, and delayed Meade's arrival while he repaired the damage hadn't soothed his temper in the least. It never took the old hellion long to reach the boiling point, and he was practically bubbling over now.

"Snodgrass!" he bellowed. "Eben Snodgrass! Where is he?"

"Why, hello, Mr. Meade," said the little undertaker apprehensively. "Who d'you mean?"

"Stanley Burke," roared the old rancher savagely. "Where's his body?"

"In the back room, Mr. Meade," said Snodgrass, wishing the owner of the Old Anchor would stop roaring and glaring at him. The fat little man had the wild impression Meade might turn into a king of the jungle and tear him to bits with claws and fangs at any instant. "I was holding it according to the marshal's orders."

"Well, you ain't holdin' it no longer."

The old man's fierce eyes swept over the scene in the front parlor, noting the dead man on the couch, the unconscious peace officer on the floor, and John Anderson standing there frowning. Bizarre as the tableau was, it didn't even faze the old hellion. He passed it over as a matter of no importance, because he wasn't interested in anything now but the business which had brought him to town.

"Show me the body so I can identify it," commanded Meade abruptly. "If it's really Stan Burke, I'm goin' to skin some dirty skunk alive. I'll take this blasted town apart. Where's my womenfolks? Where's Hank Maxwell?"

"I don't rightly know the answers to all your questions," said Snodgrass sadly, amazed to find he was still alive and unharmed. "But come on back here to view the remains."

The old hellion stormed after the fat little undertaker, almost stepping on him and causing Snodgrass to scurry out of the way like a fat tabby cat.

The thunder of Abe Meade's voice and the noise of his passage aroused the recumbent peace marshal. Quigley groaned, opened his eyes and stared at the ceiling. He started to rub his aching jaw, and became fully conscious.

"Where is that ornery troublemaker?" he demanded of Anderson as he scrambled to his feet.

"If you mean Morton," said Anderson coldly, "he's gone. He slugged you and ran out."

Quigley glared at the young owner of the PDQ. "Why didn't you stop him?"

"Why in hell should I have even tried?" demanded Anderson, contempt in his voice. "You got no call to arrest Morton, and you know it, Quigley."

"The heck I haven't," grunted the marshal grimly. "I'm the law in this town, and I'm going to throw Morton in jail the minute I clap eyes on him until he's been duly cleared of murder."

"Murder!" snorted Anderson. "Hardwick tries to kill me by sticking a knife in my back, just as he tried to kill Morton at the dance hall last night. Morton shoots him and saves my life, and what happens?"

"What?" demanded Quigley staring at the redhead in surprise that was tinged with a certain amount of slow dawning respect. The lawman hadn't realized John Anderson had the nerve to talk to him this way. "Go on, what?"

"A loud-mouthed, walrus-faced hombre who only starts spouting about being the law when he's sure he can play it safe wants to stick Morton in jail," said Anderson. "Yes, lock him up on suspicion of murder because he saved my life. I'm beginning to wonder about you, Quigley, and so will every right thinking man in this town if you keep acting like this."

"The way I see it, I'm just doing my duty," said the marshal. "There ain't no reason for you to get so hot under the collar, Johnny."

"I'm not sure of that," said Anderson. "Maybe you and some other men in this town would feel safer if Morton was in jail so he couldn't learn any more about the whole sneaking bunch."

"There's nothing sneaking about me," said Quigley. "Who's that shouting in the back room?"

"Abe Meade's come to town, and he's on the prod," said Anderson. "You're about to find your hands full, Mister."

Whatever else he may have been Quigley was no coward. He started grimly for the back room. Anderson followed him.

"That's my cousin, all right," Abe Meade was growling in a slightly modulated roar. "You put him in the finest coffin you got, Snodgrass, and get him ready for a first-class funeral. And don't skimp none. We'll hold the funeral in the morning. Now, I'm going to the hotel and hunt up——"

"Just a minute, Mr. Meade," said Snodgrass sadly. "I ain't got but one coffin made up right now, and——"

"Use it, Snodgrass," ordered Anderson sharply.

For the first time Meade took cognizance of his neighbouring rancher. There was almost a twinkle in his eyes as he gazed at the young redhead.

"The box you ordered for me, eh?" he said in a mild tone. "I don't reckon you killed Stanley Burke by mistake, Anderson. You oughta know me too well to make an error like that."

"I do," said Anderson, standing quiet but flushing to the roots of his red hair. "I'm not apologizing to you for anything I do, Abe Meade."

"Humph!" snorted the old hellion. His rage was still with him, but it had turned into a cold, bitter hatred for the killer or killers of his cousin. In that he didn't suspect Anderson, and there was something of admiration in his expression for this young rooster who stood up to him without backing down. "I'll tend to you later, Anderson. You've made your boast—when I get time I'll see you have a chance to live up to it."

"Come gunning when you're ready," said Anderson grimly. "Personally, I've changed my mind about you. I wouldn't harm a white hair in your stubborn old head unless you shoot first."

"There's goin to be plenty of shootin'," declared the old man.

"There's already been too much," said Marshal Quigley firmly. "That freighter in the front room was just killed to-night. I gather he's the feller who shot your cousin, Meade. I'll clear that up soon as I get hold of the man who shot him."

"Freighter?" shouted Abe Meade. "A Maxwell man, huh?"

That's what I thought. Soon's I locate Burke's womenfolks I'll see Hank Maxwell."

He started out, and Marshal Quigley stubbornly got in his way.

"Hold on, Abe Meade," Quigley said in grim determination. "You ain't popular in Sand Wells, and I'm warning you not to stir up any more trouble than there already is. I'll handle this business."

"You're telling me what?" roared Meade. "Why you overgrown example of a misspent life I wouldn't let you tell me it was raining if it was pouring for a week." The old man grabbed Quigley by the upper arms and fairly lifted the marshal off his feet. "You'll handle this business. Did you get the hombre who killed my cousin?"

"Well, no," stammered Quigley. "But I heard it was Hardwick."

"Oh, sure," shouted Meade, slamming the marshal back down so hard it jarred the lawman from head to foot. "Any long-eared jackass is supposed to hear a hell of a lot, but I never heard of one doing a damn thing about it. That goes for you, Quigley. Even if you were half the man you think you are I still wouldn't consider you worth a hoot."

"I'm warning you," snarled Quigley with a futile attempt to regain his braggadocio. "Don't you start no trouble."

"Shut up!" roared Meade. "I don't start trouble—I finish it." He gave the marshal a shove that sent Quigley reeling back against the nearest wall. "You tend to your own knitting and stay out of my way. You give me a pain that bothers me the worst when I'm sitting down."

Quigley's mouth opened and closed as Abe Meade stalked out of the undertaker's establishment. The marshal looked like a bull walrus trying to call to his mate.

Out in the street, Abe Meade leaped into his buckboard and drove his team lickerty-split down the middle of the street to the hotel. Everything and everybody got out of his way. Even the horses standing at the hitching rails edged around as if fearing they might lose their tails or even hind-quarters from the passing tornado.

Meade brought his team to a prancing stop in front of the hotel. Hurling his reins to a roustabout who came out the front door he gave an order.

"Take this team to Kilgore's livery stable and see they get a good rubdown and a good feedin' after they're cooled off," commanded Meade. "Do it right, or I'll trim your long ears off."

He stormed into the hotel, boot-heels thumping across the lobby, and caught sight of Sam Trench just coming out of the dining room. He pounced on the hotel keeper like a mastiff grabbing a terrier. Trench's jaw dropped and he went white. He was suddenly more frightened than he had ever been before in his life. He had done everything in his power to stir up public opinion against this old mun who towered over him. Had Meade learned what the hotel owner had been doing, had he come bursting in here for a final reckoning? Trench didn't know but he was decidedly alarmed. He tried to back away, but there was no escaping this human tornado.

"Trench!" roared the old hellion, clutching him by the shoulder and shaking him fiercely. "Where's Mary and Sally Burke? What room are they in?"

"They—they're not staying at the hotel, Mr. Meade," gasped out Trench, feeling like a murderer who had been granted a last minute stay of execution. "Leave go, and I'll tell you."

"What?" bellowed Meade, giving a last shake before releasing Trench. He had never liked the hotel man and enjoyed seeing him wiggle. "What you done with 'em?"

Puffing and blowing, Trench readjusted his clothes and shot the old man a venomous glance. If looks could kill, Abe Meade would have been a dead man, but he didn't even pay any attention to the hotel man's baleful glare.

"They moved over to the dance hall this morning," Trench said. "They're staying with Belle Howard."

"You turned them out!" shouted Meade, clenching his mighty fist. "I oughta pistol-whip you!"

"No!" shouted Trench. "I didn't do it. I offered to let 'em stay here free, but they wouldn't do it. The girl is working at the dance hall."

"You let womenfolks of mine do a thing like that?" The old man's rage was majestic. "Why, you dirty coyote! Get behind that desk counter and register them in the best suite in this place—right now! I'm going after them, and you

better have the finest rooms in this rat-trap ready by the time I get back."

"Yes, sir, of course," agreed Trench, backing toward the desk and the wide-eyed clerk.

Abe Meade whirled on his heel and raged out of the hotel. Trench stared after him, and the hotel keeper's face was distorted with rage and hate.

"Never mind the register," he snarled at the expectant clerk. "That old devil has raised his last rumpus. He's not the king of creation he thinks he is. Start gathering together the men who were here last night."

"You mean—you mean you're going to raise another lynch mob?" stammered the aghast clerk.

"You heard what I said." As he spoke Trench's tone was calmer now, but there was a cold ruthlessness in his words "The whole town's against that old hellion."

Unaware of the train of powder he had laid in his wake, Abe Meade strode fiercely along the street and shouldered his way into Faro Thorpe's saloon. He was conscious of the rumble of voices, the clink of glasses and bottles as he glared around at the gathering night crowd. Then, shaking his head like an angry bull, he headed for the archway to the dance hall.

Silence followed him like a creeping mantle as men recognised him and moved out of his way, breaking off their talk and staring fearfully after this towering giant in the worn range clothes. As though at a psychic signal, Faro Thorpe appeared, blond, suave and as always so very sure of himself. Without the slightest sign of emotion he advanced from the rear precincts of the saloon and met the old rancher near the foot of the stairs at the archway.

"Good evening, Mr. Meade," he said quietly, but his voice cut through the place like a knife. "Something I can do for you?"

"Yes," roared Abe Meade savagely. "What the hell do you mean by bringing my womenfolks to a joint like this? Where are they? Trot 'em out quick before I wreck this low down outfit!"

"Calm down, Mr. Meade," said Thorpe evenly, but his blue eyes narrowed and glittered. "You don't need to shout. Personally I've always felt a man who rants and raves isn't

quite sure of himself. But I assure you no harm has come to Miss or Mrs. Burke, they came here of their own free will."

"Faro Thorpe," thundered the old hellion, "I'll give you just one minute to produce Mary and Sally Burke."

Belle Howard came running from the dance floor, her eyes alive with anxiety. She knew just how much trouble the presence of this bombastic old man might cause and she also realized that the gambler would not tolerate too much arrogance within the confines of his own establishment. Everybody waited tensely for the fireworks they were sure would explode. But Faro Thorpe surprised them.

"Certainly, Mr. Meade," he said softly, a smile on his thin lips. "I've been expecting you. In fact I've wondered why you have not arrived in town before this."

"Huh?" Meade stared at him in amazement.

"The ladies are upstairs in Miss Howard's suite," said Thorpe. "Belle, will you please conduct Mr. Meade to them? The 'no gentlemen above stairs' rule does not apply in this case."

"Everything's all right, Abe," said Belle soothingly as she took the old man's arm. "Come with me."

"Lead the way," said the old man gruffly, shaking himself free impatiently. "I guess maybe I'm a mite too touchy."

The mistress of the dance hall smiled and led the way up the stairs. Abe Meade shook himself like a quieting wolfhound and trailed along behind her.

Faro Thorpe stood there for a long minute, his hand on the single newel post of the stairs which ran up along the partition wall. He saw the couple disappear as they reached the landing above. Then he smiled wider and jerked his head at several men standing along the saloon bar. He turned and started lightly up the steps, and the gun-hung men from the bar filed over and took on their station at the foot of the stairs.

CHAPTER TWELVE

HENRY MAXWELL sat at his desk in the mine office cogitating deeply. Under the glow of the shaded oil lamp on the desk his naturally ruddy face seemed to take on a fiery red hue. It made him seem both Satanic and sinister but actually the manager of the borax mines was not in a malevolent mood. He was merely trying to get a number of things straight in his own mind.

Save for the desk lamp before him the office was dark, and he was the only person in the building. He dimly heard men running and shouting on the street, but even this did not arouse him.

Maxwell was thinking deeply about the discussion he had had with Steve Morton in the Palace Dance Hall earlier in the evening. It was considerably past the time he had promised to meet Morton here at his office, but he knew that failure could well have been his own fault. He had spent nearly an hour looking for Hardwick after leaving Morton with Belle Howard at the dance hall. Doubtless Morton had given him up and turned his nosy attention elsewhere.

If such was the case Maxwell wasn't sure whether he was glad or sorry that the tall dark stranger had failed to contact him. Morton had said enough about the killing of Stanley Burke to make the mining company manager anxious to have all the details.

There were puzzling angles, such as why Morton seemed to consider the heel which had been shot off the dead man's boot such a vital factor. That Morton felt this bit of evidence important was in itself food for thought. It was more the reactions of some sort of strange detective than that of a drifter acting out of mere curiosity.

The more he thought about the whole situation the more certain Henry Maxwell became that events were swiftly reaching a climax. He wouldn't have been manager of the borax mining company in sole charge of operations in this

part of the country if he hadn't been a man with brains. He was capable of making split-second decisions when the need arose, and it looked like such action upon his part was necessary now. Things were beginning to crowd up, and he knew he must make some decisive moves—and quickly.

Maxwell was no better able to concentrate on one given subject for any length of time than was anyone else. He found his thoughts drifting away from the problems at hand as a vision of Belle Howard rose before him. He was conscious of the sparkle of her dark eyes, the whiteness of her skin, the smile of her lips that sometimes seemed a promise and at others a mockery. She fascinated him at all times and Henry Maxwell was startled to find himself wondering if he were actually in love with the pretty dance hall hostess.

The creaking of the rear door of the office brought him to himself with a start, and he reached for his gun.

"Don't pull it, Maxwell!" a harsh, gruff voice warned him.

"Who are you?" snapped the mine manager, peering into the dark. "What do you want?"

Slowly, reluctantly Maxwell obeyed, his eyes staring at the figure which gradually loomed out of the shadows. He was ready and waiting to identify his mysterious caller, but he was doomed to disappointment. There was no chance of recognizing the masked and cloaked figure in black that came within the circle of lamplight and faced Maxwell across the desk.

"Who are you?" demanded Maxwell again, his voice hoarse in spite of himself.

The man in black merely stood silently staring at him, and suddenly Maxwell gasped.

"You are—the Dark Knight!" he exclaimed. "No! It isn't possible. The Dark Knight hasn't been reported in this part of the country."

"Nevertheless, I'm here," said his amazing visitor sternly. "There's to be an accounting in Sand Wells tonight."

"I'm not answerable to you," said Maxwell in quick defence. "I'm not guilty of anything."

"You are guilty of being a colossal fool, Henry Maxwell," accused the Dark Knight. "In your driving ambition to force a right-of-way through Abraham Meade's land you're directly responsible for all the trouble that's brewing here on this range."

"I am not!" protested Maxwell, but there was a note of doubt in his voice. "Who accuses me? That drifter named Morton?"

"You accuse yourself, Maxwell. You've brought every bit of pressure to bear that you could in trying to force Meade to sell you a strip of land. When he refused to do so and tried to lease you a right-of-way at what you considered an outrageous price you tried to get his land condemned by the governor of this territory."

"What's wrong with that?" demanded the mine manager. "It's only good business, and a railroad spur means a lot to everybody in this section. Why should one man be allowed to stand in the way?"

"Why? Because that man hadn't the right to sell you any of his land. He was trying to deal with you the only way he knew how."

"I'd have paid him his price for the land, but not for just a leased right-of-way. Why couldn't he sell? I'll tell you the reason. Because he's a hard-headed, stubborn old miser trying to hold up the Goddard Company for all he can get. He simply overmatched himself this time."

"Maxwell," said the Dark Knight, shaking his head pityingly, "you are a fool. You've been instrumental in setting a train of far-reaching events in action. Other factors outside of your feud with Meade have entered the picture, brought into being by your loggerhead tactics. Hasn't it occurred to you that a third party might be using you for his own selfish ends?"

"Who?" demanded Maxwell tersely. "John Anderson?"

"No, not John Anderson," said the Dark Knight. "You and Anderson are both being used as tools and scapegoats by this other man. Because you two men have the most obvious reasons to hate Abraham Meade you are being led to the slaughter like lambs. Men in your pay, like Hardwick, and men in Anderson's pay are working for your unseen enemy, piling up the evidence against you, and you sit still and let matters go to the extreme of murder."

"That's a lie!" exclaimed Maxwell hotly. "I have no dealings of any kind with Anderson or anybody else."

"Don't forget your freighter, Hardwick, who lies dead over at Snodgrass' place right now," said the Dark Knight. "Or don't you believe the evidence against Hardwick?"

"Hardwick dead?" Maxwell stared at the black-clad man in amazement. "No wonder I couldn't find him. Who killed him?"

"The drifter you call Morton, just in time to save Anderson's life. Hardwick was about to stab the owner of the PDQ in the back. And now Morton is being hunted by Marshal Quigley for this killing. Morton can neither help nor hinder you now, Maxwell."

"Who is this man who uses me for a tool?" demanded Maxwell in a grating voice, his hands clinching and unclenching before him. "Tell me his name, Dark Knight."

"You're through talking, Mr. Dark Knight!" interrupted a hard voice from the open back door of the office.

The Dark Knight's hands swept down to the butts of the Colts in his holsters, but he was too late. A gun roared from just inside the back door. The masked man pitched forward, one arm knocking the oil lamp to the floor as he sprawled across the desk. The glass chimney of the lamp shattered and the flame went out.

In the darkness Henry Maxwell was on his feet, firing wildly in the direction of the rear door. He heard a grunt of pain as if a bullet had nicked someone, then the sound of running feet as the man at the rear door dashed away.

"Good God!" exclaimed Maxwell in swift dawning horror. "Everyone will believe I shot and killed the Dark Knight. There's no way to prove I didn't do it."

A wave of sheer panic swept over the mining company manager as he stood there in the darkness, still holding his gun in his hand. He no longer could think clearly. His one idea was that he had to get away at once. No one must find him here with the corpse of the Dark Knight.

He dropped his gun back into the holster and made his way as best he could through the darkness toward the front door of the office building. Twice he stumbled over furniture and nearly fell, but he managed to regain his balance in time and keep right on going. It seemed hours before he finally reached the front entrance. He had left this door open, too, since he had been expecting the arrival of Steve Morton.

He stepped out, then closed and locked the door behind him. Somewhere in the distance he heard men shouting, it seemed to come from the direction of the hotel, and sounded like the roaring of an angry mob.

Vaguely Maxwell wondered what the trouble might be, but he didn't much care. He had plenty of worries of his own. The Dark Knight had told him he was a fool, the unwitting dupe of some other man. There had been such conviction in the masked man's tone that Maxwell now found he believed every word the Dark Knight had said. It had all been so logical, so convincing that it just had to be the truth.

Standing there in front of the mine office Maxwell tried to decide what to do next. He was growing a bit calmer, for he was a man of courage as well as brains. He couldn't run like some frightened rabbit to hide in some secret burrow. That was not his way of doing things.

"Maybe the Dark Knight isn't really dead," he muttered. "Maybe just badly wounded, and I left him there in the office to die alone."

He realized he had to go back, to face the risk of being accused of killing the Dark Knight. It would be considered murder when the black-clad outlaw was found there sprawled across the desk with his guns not even drawn.

Maxwell stepped toward the locked front door of the building, drawing out his keys. He halted and whirled as he heard footsteps behind him. He waited, then grew tense as the lean figure of Marshal Quigley loomed into view.

"Maxwell," said the lawman as he came closer and recognized the mine manager. "What's happened? I heard shots coming from this direction a little bit ago."

"I heard them too, Quigley," said Maxwell truthfully. "Sounded like they might be coming from inside this building. We'd better take a look around."

"There's so much trouble in town tonight I don't know where to turn first," said Quigley. "Abe Meade come roaring in loaded for bear. Morton kills one of your men, a freighter named Hardwick. When I try to hold Morton for questioning he knocks me out and gets away. Last I heard of Meade he was heading for the Palace to tear up the place, after finding his womenfolks weren't at the hotel."

"What's all the excitement at the hotel?" asked Maxwell as he unlocked the front door. "I heard a lot of shouting coming from that direction."

"Sam Trench is stirring up folks because Meade is in town," said the marshal. "I ain't even trying to stop that."

Sometimes I wonder why in hell I ever wanted to be a peace officer anyway. There's sure nothing peaceful about the job."

"I'll go in first, Marshal," said Maxwell. "There's a lamp just to the left of the door."

He stepped inside the building, and Quigley followed, with gun ready. Maxwell found the oil lamp, struck a match and lighted the wick. The two men peered around in the yellow glow.

"No one here," said Quigley.

"Let's go back to my office," said Maxwell, picking up the lamp.

He led the way, and finally halted and stood staring blankly at his empty desk. There was no sign of the sprawled figure of the Dark Knight. Relief swept over Henry Maxwell, and he spoke before he thought.

"Why he's gone," he said.

"Whose gone?" demanded the marshal, suspicion in his voice. "You know something about all this you ain't telling, Maxwell?"

"No, of course not," said Maxwell. "I just meant whoever was in here is gone. Don't you see what must have happened, Marshal?"

"No," said Quigley. "I don't."

"Why it's as plain—as plain as your moustache," said Maxwell putting the lighted lamp down on the desk. "Apparently someone sneaked in here, through the back door—you can see it's still open."

"So it is," said the marshal, glancing at the back door. "Go on."

"It looks like somebody was going through my desk," said Maxwell. "He was evidently discovered by some other man, and they started firing at each other."

"What makes you think that?" Quigley looked puzzled.

"The way the lamp was knocked off the desk and fell to the floor," said the mining company manager. "It's relevant, germane to factors involved, even though you might be inclined to feel dialectic or disputatious about it."

"Unhuh," said the marshal dazedly. "But why was the lamp smashed?"

"Because the prowler evidently had to put out the light fast to keep from being killed by the other man who started

shooting at him," said Maxwell. "Whence, wherefore, and consequently the lamp is a complete verification of my theory of the general trend of events."

"Oh, sure," said Quigley, heading for the open back door, with gun still ready. "And to wit to wo!"

He reached the back door and peered out. Maxwell joined him and they stood there, with their gaze searching the shadows. There was no sign of anyone around.

"Your prowler seems to have escaped, Maxwell," said Quigley. "No use searching for him or the other man now. Better lock this back door and we'll leave by the front way."

"Of course," said Maxwell.

He closed the rear door and bolted it from the inside. The marshal stood watching. Then the two men walked back to Maxwell's desk.

"There's just one more thing, Maxwell," said the marshal dryly. "Merely as corroboration of the facts and attestation of the evidence, and to prove I also once read a dictionary I'm making a request."

"What's that, Marshal?" asked Maxwell in surprise.

"Let me see your gun," said Quigley, his tone growing cold.

Maxwell hesitated, then drew his gun and handed it to the peace officer butt first. Quigley swiftly examined the weapon and then nodded.

"Three shots fired," said the marshal. "And it could have been right recent. I heard four shots coming from this direction. What's the real story of what happened, Maxwell?"

"You'll never believe me if I tell you the truth, Matt," said Maxwell, sinking wearily into a chair. "That's why I've been stalling up to now."

"Try me and find out," said Quigley. "Here's your gun, Henry. Just wanted to check and see if I was right."

"Thanks." Maxwell put the gun back in his holster. "About half an hour ago—perhaps longer, I can't be sure of the exact time. I was sitting here along at my desk. Suddenly a masked man dressed in black appeared——"

"A masked man in black!" interrupted the marshal. "That and a couple of wild elephants running loose are all I need to make my evening plumb complete." He frowned. "Who was he?"

"The Dark Knight," said Maxwell. "He assured me of his identification, and said I was a fool."

"Just one man's opinion, don't take it to heart," said the marshal. "Sometimes I figure the whole town thinks that about their esteemed marshal, me included. Go on. What's the Dark Knight doing around this part of the country?"

Maxwell hesitated, and then reached a sudden decision. He swiftly told the peace officer the gist of his entire conversation with the Dark Knight.

"The Dark Knight was just about to tell me the name of this other man he claims is using me for a dupe," finished Maxwell, "when we heard a voice from the open back door. A gun roared and the Dark Knight fell across my desk, knocking over the lamp as he did so."

"Was he killed?" demanded Quigley.

"I thought so," said Maxwell, deciding to say nothing about his panic over being accused as the killer of the Dark Knight. "I fired at the man at the back door but he got away."

"Kinda put you in a tight," said the marshal. "If you were found with the Dark Knight dead in your office folks might think you killed him, Hank."

"That's right," said Maxwell, looking at the peace officer in surprise. "You're smart, Matt."

"Unhuh," said Quigley. "Bring the lamp so we can see our way to the front door, and let's get out of here."

Maxwell picked up the lamp and the two men made their way to the front door. The mine company manager put the lamp down and blew it out. Then the two men stepped out of the building.

"I've got to run along now," said Quigley, as Maxwell locked the front door. "I'm still wondering about one thing, but I don't figure to learn the answer right off."

"What's that?" asked Maxwell.

"Just what you did with the body," said the marshal, and he turned and walked away.

Henry Maxwell just stood there staring as the lean, tall form of the peace officer faded into the distance, as Matt Quigley walked on along the street without once looking back over his shoulder.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

As soon as he heard the hard voice of the man in the shadows at the back door of Henry Maxwell's office the reactions of the Dark Knight had been instantaneous. Even as he made a swift grab for the Colts in his holsters he realized it was too late to draw and fire. That he presented an easy target flashed through the mind of the black-clad outlaw. He was clearly visible in the yellow glow of the lamp burning on Maxwell's desk while the man at the rear door was nothing more than a blur in the shadows.

There was only one thing for the Dark Knight to do in order to save his own life. He deliberately fell forward just a split-second before his foe's gun roared. The bullet whistled by his left ear like an angry hornet to soar on through the building to the front wall near the door, the thud it made as it reached its final resting place unheard by Maxwell or the unknown killer.

The apparent dying reflex of the Dark Knight's right arm that had knocked the lamp from the desk and sent it crashing to the floor had been deliberate. As he hoped, the lamp went out, leaving the office in darkness.

As he sprawled there across the desk the Dark Knight heard the thunder of Maxwell's gun, and saw the flashes of flame as the mine man, Jer fired three shots at the killer at the rear door. He heard the grunt as if the man in the shadows might have been at least slightly wounded, though the Robin Hood outlaw knew if the man had been in the path of a .44 or .45 slug the wound was not slight. Such bullets could tear up plenty of epidermis.

Then to his ears came the sound of running feet and he realized the killer had dashed out the back door and raced on into the night.

The Dark Knight remained motionless, conscious that Maxwell was standing not far away. In the silence that was filled with the acrid smell of gunsmoke the mining company

manager spoke, aloud, his words coming clearly to the masked man still sprawled across the desk.

"Good God!" exclaimed Maxwell. "Everyone will believe I shot and killed the Dark Knight. There's no way to prove I didn't do it."

In that moment the Dark Knight felt sorry for Henry Maxwell. He started to reveal the fact he was still very much alive to the mine manager, but remained silent as a thought struck him.

Maxwell had agreed to meet Steve Morton at the mine office tonight. The supervisor of the activities of the borax company had been evidently waiting to keep the appointment, but why had that back door been so conveniently left open. Had it been because Maxwell had the killer planted outside the rear of the building with orders to kill Steve Morton when the right opportunity presented itself?

It was a possibility, and yet Maxwell might have been taken quite as much unaware by the appearance of the gunman at the back door as had been the Dark Knight. But because suspicion was still strong within him the masked man decided to continue playing dead a while longer.

He remained right where he was as he heard Maxwell making his stumbling, obviously frightened way through the darkness to the front door of the building. Then the Dark Knight swiftly stood erect. He heard the front door close, and the sound was a signal for him to go into action.

With silent, stealthy strides he reached the open rear door. The night air was cool against his face as he stepped out through the opening. The keen blue eyes that stared out through the holes in the black mask that hid his lean, strong face, searched every foot of the dark shadows around him. It was only a few seconds before he was quite convinced he was alone, there was no one else lingering behind the Goddard Mining Company building.

He glanced over his shoulder, wondering if he should close it. Then he decided against doing so. The door had been open when Maxwell left the office by the front way, let him find it just as it had been when he departed if the mine manager decided to return.

As he stood there the Dark Knight thought swiftly. He was worried about Abe Meade, anxious to do everything in his

power to protect the pig-headed, fearless old rancher. Yet he was sure the time had not as yet arrived for him to act hastily.

Meade had gone to the Palace in a towering rage to rescue Mary and Sally Burke from what the old man obviously considered a den of iniquity. The Dark Knight was sure that Belle Howard was quite capable of convincing Abe Meade his opinion of the place was greatly distorted to say the least. Sally and her mother might also resent such an attitude upon the part of their nearest of kin.

However, it was Faro Thorpe who, in the estimation of the Dark Knight, was a dangerous factor as far as the safety of the owner of the Old Anchor was concerned. There was no telling just how the suave blond gambler might react.

"Looks like I'm kinda in a tight," the Dark Knight decided. "I can't go busting into the Palace with a gun in each hand, just because I've got a feeling Abe Meade may be in danger. If nothing has happened, I'll sure make the Dark Knight look right silly."

There was logic in his conclusion. Always the Dark Knight depended to a great extent upon the element of surprise in confronting his foes. He was quite conscious that after all he was only one man. Because of this he always tried to make his appearance at any scene of conflict both dramatic and unexpected.

With this thought in mind he decided he would investigate the situation further before going into the Palace. If he walked into the saloon and dance hall clad in his mask and dark hat and black cloak the men in the place would be startled at first by the entrance of the Dark Knight, but too many of them might also remember his reputation as a wanted outlaw. In such a crowd it would be impossible for him to watch all of them, and the chance of his getting a bullet in his back was a very definite possibility.

From the direction of the hotel there came the roaring of an angry mob. To anyone who had ever heard the sound there was something awing and terrifying about it. It was humanity unleashed and unthinking. At such times men could grow more primitive than had been their remote ancestors in the early dawn of civilization.

"Sounds like Sam Trench has been stirring up more

trouble," muttered the Dark Knight. "And I'd better get Ebony and see if I can put a stop to it."

Quickly the black-clad man disappeared as he hastened in the direction of the place behind one of the buildings where he had left the stallion waiting patiently in the darkness.

In front of the hotel Sam Trench stood on a wooden chair he had brought out and placed on the plank walk. For fully twenty minutes he had been raving and ranting to the crowd of men that gradually grew larger around him.

"And I repeat again that Abe Meade is the cause of all our troubles!" shouted Trench. "There's not a man here who doesn't owe his livelihood in one way or another to the borax mines. If Meade would only be man enough to sell the mining company the right-of-way for the railroad spur Sand Wells would be more prosperous than any other town in this part of the territory of New Mexico."

"That's right!" shouted a man in the crowd, and no one took a second look to notice he was Trench's hotel clerk. "Meade should be lynched for holding up progress."

There came a roar of agreement from a number of the other men in the crowd.

"Now you're talking," said Trench loudly. "I've got news that most of you don't know. I've been holding it back because I wanted every right thinking citizen in the sound of my voice to hear it."

"What news?" shouted another man in the mob.

"Abe Meade is right here in town tonight," said Trench. "He's at the Palace. And why did he go there? Because he claims the place isn't good enough for his women-folks. Not good enough" shouted the hotel man angrily. "Why that's an insult to Belle Howard and all those pretty girls she has working for her."

"That's right," yelled another man in the crowd. "But let's quit all this talking and go get Abe Meade."

"Good!" said Trench delighted at the way he had worked the mob up to a fever pitch. "Now you're talking sense. I——"

He broke off abruptly and stood staring open-mouthed as something showed behind the men gathered around him.

"What's the matter, Sam?" called a man at the front of the crowd.

"It—it must be the Dark Knight," muttered Trench.

Even though the hotel keeper's voice was lower his words carried. Men glanced back over their shoulders and then swung around to stare at the masked man on the great black horse who came straight toward them.

"The Dark Knight, the Dark Knight."

The words echoed and reechoed through the crowd as men repeated them until it sounded like some sort of a Gregorian chant. On came Ebony heading straight into the crowd. The stallion was held down to a walk by the firm hand of the Dark Knight on the reins, but men scrambled out of the way in fear of being trampled by those powerful hoofs or knocked aside by the horse's great chest.

"I'm coming for you, Sam Trench," called out the Dark Knight, and there was something in his voice that made the crowd quiet down and stand listening. "You've tried too hard to stir up trouble in this town."

"For me?" said Trench nervously. "But I never did you any harm. I never even knew the Dark Knight was in this part of the country until now."

The crowd had made a wide path now so that the magnificent man on the equally magnificent horse could ride right up to where the hotel man still stood on the chair. Here the masked man wheeled his horse and faced the crowd.

"You've all listened to Sam Trench," said the Dark Knight. "Almost let him talk you into forming a mob and go and lynch one old man. How many of you are there here, fifty, a hundred, two hundred?"

"What does that matter?" demanded Trench sullenly.

"Because when I mix up with a pack of sneaking cowards I like to count 'em," said the Dark Knight, and the contempt in his voice made the men around him writhe. "If Trench feels Abe Meade is such a menace to this town why don't he go get him alone. Why does he need to stir up a mob to do it? I'll tell you why. Because even though he's been doing a lot of shouting and hollering Sam Trench is scared to death of Abe Meade."

"That's a lie!" snarled Trench. "I just want to see justice done."

"Justice!" snapped the Dark Knight. "Have you got enough proof of any crooked work on Meade's part to turn him over to the law and have him thrown in jail?"

"What about Stanley Burke?" demanded Trench. "I got a feeling Meade had something to do with that killing."

"No, you haven't, Trench," said the Dark Knight. "You don't believe Meade would have killed his own cousin any more than any other man here does. You're just grabbing at straws and I'm wondering why."

"Straws—what do you mean—I don't understand?" said the hotel keeper.

"You've been so anxious to stir up trouble for that old man that if folks stop to think they'll begin to wonder if there isn't something mighty personal about the way you're acting, Trench," said the Dark Knight. "What have you to gain by the death of Abe Meade?"

"Why—why nothing personal," stammered Trench and he suddenly seemed alarmed. "I—I just been talking for the good of all the folks in town. Meade is holding up progress by refusing to sell the land through the pass for the railroad spur."

"You own any stock in the Goddard Mining Company?" demanded the Dark Knight. "You working for them in any sort of a paid job?"

"No, of course not," said Trench quickly.

"Then why don't you let Henry Maxwell handle his own business," snapped the Dark Knight. "Did he ask you to try and stir up these men into lynching Abe Meade? Don't bother to answer, I'll tell you I'm plumb certain he didn't. Do you know why?"

"No," said Trench sounding strangely like a ventriloquist's dummy. "Why?"

"Because Henry Maxwell is a businessman. He knows that Abe Meade is a lot more important to the Goddard Company alive than he would be dead," said the Dark Knight. "If Meade dies tonight from any cause——" the masked man's tone grew stern—"including lynching——Mrs. Burke and her daughter would probably inherit his property as his next of kin."

"Maybe that would be a good thing," said Trench. "They might be more reasonable about selling the land through the pass than Meade has been."

"Perhaps," agreed the Dark Knight. "But don't forget the whole thing would have to go through the court before Mrs. or Miss Burke could do anything about disposing of the property."

"He is right," said a man in the crowd who had been listening intently, and others near him nodded their heads in agreement. "That could take considerable time, specially since nobody knows if Abe Meade ever even made a will."

"Aw, I know what happened now," said Trench. "Meade got scared when he learned the whole town is against him so he sent for this outlaw—this Dark Knight to come and protect him. I'll bet the old devil is paying the Dark Knight plenty for sticking up for him. Yes, sir, that's it. I got the——"

Trench broke off with a startled snarl as the Dark Knight reached out and grabbed him by the back of his coat collar. With a remarkable display of strength the black-clad outlaw held the hotel keeper in mid-air at arm's length, and Sam Trench was no light weight. Then the Dark Knight released his grasp and let the hostelry owner drop. Trench landed on the plank walk in a sitting position that was decidedly painful to his dignity and his posterior.

"He's lying, men," said the Dark Knight, the eyes that peered through the holes in the mask sweeping over the faces about him in a direct challenge for any of those present to refute his statement. "I'm leaving him to all of you. Perhaps you may get him to tell you why he has been making such a personal issue of the killing of Abe Meade."

There was a quick tug on the reins, and abruptly Ebony lunged forward. Like wheat in the path of a mower the crowd parted, leaving a wide space for the Dark Knight to ride on through. The great black stallion's hoofs drummed on the dust of the street as he broke into a gallop. It seemed only moments before the Dark Knight and his swiftly moving steed had vanished from view.

"He faced us all," said a man in the crowd. "And not once did he even put his hands near his guns. Never believed it, if I hadn't seen it."

"That's right," agreed another man. "That Dark Knight sure is considerable hombre."

"He's gone now," said Trench, scrambling to his feet. "We still can get Abe Meade. Come on, men, don't let that masked coyote stop us."

"Aw, shut up, Trench," said a local citizen, contempt in his voice. "I'd had enough of your fine talk. Go pick your own chestnuts out of the fire."

There was a rumble of agreement from the other men, and then they started drifting away. Trench stood watching, not knowing just what he might say or do to bring them back, to again arouse them to the fever-pitch of a lynch mob they had been just a little while ago.

In a few minutes Trench stood alone in front of the hotel, his only companion the room clerk, looking like a tired and sheep.

"Afraid you'll have to find some other way of getting rid of Abe Meade," said the clerk. "I'm sorry, Mr. Trench."

"Keep your big mouth shut," snapped Trench.

Then in a rage that was both vicious and childish he grabbed up the chair on which he had stood to harangue the crowd and began smashing it to bits on the plank walk.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

As he followed Belle Howard up the stairs to the living quarters above the Palace dance hall Abe Meade grew remarkably quiet for a man of his tempestuous nature. Though he had never realized it before there was something soothing about this pretty woman who went on ahead of him. For the first time in the past twenty years the old hellion realized the bare back of a woman in a low cut evening gown could be a beautiful thing.

He liked the way Belle Howard was built. He always had admired females and cow critters with plenty of beef on their bones, and the dance hall hostess filled the gown she wore to overflowing.

"Maybe I'd better try to explain why Sally and Mary are here before you even talk to them, Mr. Meade," said Belle pausing and turning to him as they reached the landing of the second floor hall. "Have you time to listen?"

"Reckon so," said Meade. "Like I said before I don't want to be too hasty before I know the right of things."

"Good!" said Belle, with a smile. "Now you're talking like the man I always thought you were, Abe."

He stood there gazing at her, conscious of the kind and gentle gaze of her dark eyes, the hair that was such a deep brown it seemed black in the light of the oil lamps burning along the hall. The face that something or someone back along the tired years had made into a strong but lovely mask. The neck that was like a graceful column rising from her white shoulders. The soft curves of her full figure.

In that brief moment Abe Meade grew young again. Not always had he been the irascible old curmudgeon he was now. There had been a time when Abe Meade had been one of the most dashing young cowboys in all Texas. A giant among men and whose six feet four and a half inches of rawboned strength brought a second glance from every woman he had met. A time when the world was his oyster and in his estima-

tion every day was fish day. Adoration was so easy it didn't seem to matter so he loved and laughed and rode away.

It was not until he was in his late thirties that he at last decided he had found the right girl. When he told her how he felt about her he was sure their happiness would last forever for he believed the moonlight in her words.

Then came the day, not more than a week before their wedding was to have been, when he found her in the arms of another man. Then she told Abe she had never really loved him, though she hadn't quite realized it until that moment.

To Abe Meade the world suddenly became as hard and ruthless as the hot sun glaring down on the endless rolling dunes of the desert. For the first time came the wild rage that was to ride him like a strange old man from the sea forever afterward. He smashed a hard fist into the face of the man who had stolen his girl and left him lying senseless. Then without a word to the girl he was to have married, Meade stalked to his horse and rode away, never to return again to that part of Texas.

But he left something behind him there. Perhaps it was ambition, perhaps merely no longer caring just what happened next, but the spark was gone. With the passing years Abe Meade became just another cowboy. Always a good hand, who did his work well, but never one whom could be considered a friendly hombre.

In those years there were only three men who ever sought to break through the bitter crust Meade wore always like some strange shield and seek the real man hidden beneath the shell. Those three had been Limpy Logan, Gabe Harper and Bronc Wilcox. It was because they knew and understood him despite his raving and ranting that they were working for him now.

It was because of the past that Abe Meade had never married, for he had never been able to quite trust another woman. That was why his first cousin Stanley Burke had been his nearest of kin.

Abruptly he became conscious that Belle was waiting to speak. He heard a slight sound behind him, and discovered that Faro Thorpe had reached the head of the stairs. The gambler just halted and stood there, handsome and yet as expressionless as some wax dummy.

"Go on, Belle," said Meade. "What did you want to tell me?"

He saw Belle glance over his shoulder at Thorpe. Saw her expression change at sight of the gambler. It was a bitter yet sort of pleading look the old rancher didn't understand and didn't feel he should even try. He had grown old again and it was a feeling that always left him lonely.

"Just that Sally and her mother like it here," said Belle too swiftly, as if she had changed her mind about what she had intended to say. "Sally is sensitive. They couldn't stay at the hotel because they were broke and wouldn't accept charity. That's why I gave Sally a job playing and singing in the dance hall. So she could feel she was doing something to help herself and her mother."

"We didn't know then that they were related to you, Meade," said Faro Thorpe as he came on along the hall. "That you might even object to their being here."

"No," said Belle. "We didn't know that. But come on Abe. I'll take you to your womenfolks."

She led the way to a closed door along the hall. Meade followed, while Thorpe stood watching and waiting like some tawny jungle cat ever ready to spring.

"Sally—Mary!" Belle called as she rapped on the door. "I've brought someone to see you."

In a moment the door opened. Sally stood there, young and tiny, her brown eyes staring at the big old man. Then she smiled and it was like ice breaking in the thaw after a long cold winter.

"Why—why Cousin Abe," she said. "It's so nice to see you. You see, I do remember even though I was a little girl that time you visited us in Shrevesport."

"Howdy, Sally," said Meade. "You sure grew up into a mighty pretty gal."

Then Mary Burke appeared beside her daughter and they were both talking excitedly, thrilled by the unexpected appearance of this towering old giant who was one of their own people.

Belle stepped over to Thorpe and spoke in a tone so low the trio at the door of the room could not hear her.

"Something special on your mind, Faro?" Belle asked.

"That's right." Thorpe nodded. "Something very special."

His voice was as low as her's had been, but she didn't like the coldness in his tone.

"What?" she demanded.

"Now that Meade is here I want to be sure he doesn't leave said Thorpe. "I've a little business I want to go over with him first."

"Business?" Belle stared at him. "What business?"

"A personal matter." She shivered at the cold blue stare.

"Perhaps the less you know about it the better."

"Just as you wish." Belle shrugged. "But suppose Abe decides to take Sally and Mary and leave?"

"It wouldn't be a wise move on His part," Thorpe said. "Take a look at the foot of the stairs."

Belle glanced at him, frowned, then went to the head of the stairs. In a few seconds she came back looking pale and frightened.

"You devil," she said softly. "You've got four of those damn gunmen of yours waiting down there. Why? Because you agree with the other men in this town that Abe Meade is holding up progress?"

"Hardly," said Thorpe dryly. "I'm not that public-spirited. This is a personal matter between Meade and myself. Let it go at that."

"And if I don't?" Belle demanded defiantly.

"I'll have to teach you not to interfere," said Thorpe. "You really must learn that before we're married, my dear."

"Before what?" Belle gasped.

"I said married," repeated Thorpe firmly. "I've decided it could be a very satisfactory arrangement." He smiled. "After all, I do find you quite charming." He shrugged. "But let's discuss that at a more opportune time."

"Let's," said Belle, and he found himself puzzled by her expression. "After all, as you just said, I'm beginning to suspect you're a complete blackguard that I wouldn't wipe my shoes on in rainy weather, Faro Thorpe."

For an instant his face flushed, his blue eyes flashed in anger, and it looked like he might strike her.

"Don't forget you told me to remember you're a gentleman," she said, "I wouldn't like you to forget it either."

Abe Meade and Sally and Mary Burke had stepped into the room mother and daughter shared. The sound of their

voices drifted out through the open door, the deep, rumbling tones of the old man, the lighter and far more musical cadence when Sally or Mary spoke. They appeared to be arguing about something, but doing so quite amicably.

As he stood there in the hall alone with Belle the gambler's expression changed. She remained motionless, uncertain as to what his next move might be when he abruptly stepped toward her. She grew tense as he reached out his arms, half afraid his rage, at what she had just said was so great that his powerful fingers were about to clutch her throat and choke her to death.

But he merely drew her to him. Then he was holding her tight, her soft flesh crushed against his chest. He kissed her and she was startled by the fires burning within this man who had always seemed so distant and aloof. Yet in that moment Belle Howard learned the answer to a question that had worried her for weeks and months. She knew the answer now. She didn't love Faro Thorpe and never could love him. He meant absolutely nothing to her save as a business partner.

She was too clever, far too much a woman of the world to reveal her reactions in the slightest degree. She remained passive, apparently completely quiescent as he kissed her cheek, her throat, then released her. He stepped back, obviously shaken by his own passion.

"Let me play the cards my way, Belle," he said hoarsely. "Don't try to stop me. We'll be rich—richer than either of us have ever been in our lives."

"I've never tried to deal a hand for you, Faro," Belle said. "I never will, unless I find the game is too crooked for me to stand."

"Good," said Thorpe. "I think we understand each other."

Belle followed the gambler as he went to the room where Meade and his women folk were still talking. Mary Burke was stretched out on the big, old fashioned bed, her dark head propped up on a pillow. Her face was pale for she was still ill enough for any excitement to weaken her. Sally sat primly in a chair while the old rancher restlessly paced up and down.

"I still would feel a heap better if you'd agree to come to the ranch with me now," Meade said. "course I understand how you feel about not wanting to leave town until after the

funeral." The old man scowled. "Reckon I'm just selfish. Always has been my way to think of myself first."

"Don't be silly, Cousin Abe," said Sally. "Mother and I know you are thinking about us. But I assure you that Belle—Miss Howard—has made us quite comfortable here—and safe."

"I believe that now," said Meade. "But I sure ain't safe in Sand Wells. The whole town hates me—I'm not such a fool I don't know that. There's men in this place who'd sure enjoy tar and feathering me and riding me out of town on a rail."

"Oh, no!" protested Mary Burke. "Don't say that, Abe. I—I just couldn't stand having anything else happen to someone who is close to me. I couldn't bear it!"

"There's no reason for you to worry, Mr. Meade," said Thorpe from the doorway. "You're safe from any trouble as long as you remain here. I'll see to that—and I've men in my employ who can and will stop anyone in town from coming near you."

"Thanks, Thorpe," said the old rancher. "But I can't hang around up here. Seems like I heard you say somethin' about breaking the house rule of no gentlemen above stairs when Belle brought me up here."

"That's right—I did," said Thorpe. "But I also have living quarters on the floor on the other side of the building. I can put you up for the night there, Mr. Meade. Be glad to do it. Then—when will the funeral be?"

"Tomorrow," said Meade. "Those were the orders I gave Eben Snodgrass."

"Fine!" said the gambler. "Then stay here tonight, and after the funeral tomorrow Mrs. and Miss Burke will doubtlessly be glad to return to the ranch with you."

Abe Meade hesitated then finally nodded. "All right, Thorpe," he said. "I'm sure obliged. I'll take you up on that offer to hole up here for the night." He looked at Sally and then at Mary Burke. "Reckon we better be going now. You look tired, Mary. I'll see you both in the morning."

"Of course, Cousin Abe," said Sally, smiling at him. "Good night."

"Good night, Abe," said Mary. "God bless you."

Belle stood silently watching and listening. Once she opened

her mouth to utter a protest as the old hellion followed the gambler out into the hall, but she remained silent. This was neither the time nor the place to start any trouble.

Thorpe led the way to a door on the left along the hall—a door that was opposite Belle Howard's living quarters. There was a heavy iron bar in place. Thorpe unbarred the door and then glanced over his shoulder at the dance hall hostess.

"Perhaps you ladies will feel safer if you bar the door from your side, Belle," Thorpe said. "That way if Mr. Meade and I should run into any trouble you'll be out of danger."

"Good idea, Thorpe," said Meade. "I like knowing my womenfolks are safe."

The old man was so tall that he instinctively stooped in going on through the doorway. Thorpe followed, and the door closed gently behind them. Belle went to it and put the bar back into place. Then she returned to Sally and Mary.

"Isn't Uncle Abe wonderful," Sally said. "He seemed so cross at first, as he always does, but he really is a kind man at heart."

"Of course, Sally," said the woman on the bed. "I'm so glad we will see him again in the morning."

"I hope you will——" Belle broke off. She had been about to say she hoped they would ever see Abe Meade again alive, but she smoothed it over quickly. "I hope you will have a good night's sleep Mary. You need rest."

"Thank you, Belle," said Mary. "You have been so good to us."

"You know I think Johnny Anderson is nice," said Sally dreamily. "Don't you Belle?"

"Of course," Belle laughed. "I'll tell you all about him later, Sally. Now you help your mother get ready for bed. I've got to go downstairs and see that everything is all right there."

She stepped out of the room closing the door behind her. She looked at the barred door and wondered what Faro Thorpe and Abe Meade were doing now. As she started down the stairs she saw the four gunmen were no longer waiting down below. She knew there was another flight of steps leading up to Faro Thorpe's living quarters from the gambling rooms at the rear of the other side of the building.

"That devil!" Belle murmured. "And there's nothing I can do to stop him now unless——"

She hurried down the stairs hoping that by some freak of Fate she might find Steve Morton among the men in the dance hall, the bar or the gambling rooms below.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

JOE BLAKE was worried. The lean gunman who worked as a cowboy in John Anderson's PDQ outfit had been feeling decidedly uneasy ever since he learned Mike Hardwick was lying dead in Snodgrass' Funeral Parlor. Blake and Hardwick had received good pay for a special job they had done recently, even though they had made a serious mistake in carrying out the work assigned to them. They had drygulched and killed the wrong man. Their undercover boss had given the men plenty of hell about that.

Blake still resented the going-over he and Hardwick had received. After all when they had set out to get Abe Meade, how were they to know that a man named Stanley Burke would come riding along looking enough like the old rancher from a distance to be his twin? They had never seen or even heard of Burke before, so how could they know they'd killed the wrong man until it was too late?

To Blake it was still hard to get used to the idea that Mike Hardwick was dead. Why they both had been drinking and talking in that Mexican cantina just around sundown. They had been discussing the latest orders they'd received, and Blake hadn't liked those orders at all. Their boss was insisting on too many blasted drygulching jobs in a heck of a hurry.

Take that business of trying to get Steve Morton at the Palace dance hall last night, Blake thought. Hardwick would have done the job, too, if John Anderson hadn't stopped the knife with that fiddle before it could land in Morton's back.

Now the latest orders were to down Anderson and Morton. "Oh, sure," muttered Blake disgustedly. "And get the Dark Knight and a few other hombres at the same time."

He had tried to do a little drygulching on his own last night on his way into town from the PDQ, before he and Hardwick had entered the dance hall through the rear door and the freighter had thrown the knife at Morton. Blake had been sure Abe Meade would be coming along that road

so he had waited, hidden in the brush and rocks with his rifle ready. But who had been that other jasper with a rifle on the other side of the road?

Blake remembered the first horseman who had appeared along the road. The lean gunman had fired at that rider only to have his quarry dash away in the brush at the far side of the road. As he thought about it now Blake remembered that man had been dressed in black and riding a big black horse.

"Blazes!" exclaimed Blake. "I near downed the Dark Knight—and didn't know it until now! He must have been the hombre who was giving me a hard time with that rifle. Drove that second rider that come along away, too, by shooting at him first."

Now, as he stood on the fringe of the crowd listening to the Dark Knight giving Sam Trench a tongue-lashing, Blake was tempted to make a third attempt on the masked man's life. Twice Blake had tried to kill the Dark Knight and failed. First, last night out on the road that was close to PDQ range, and again this evening through the open back door of Henry Maxwell's office.

"Better not try it now," Blake decided. "If I do this bunch around me are likely to tear me to bits like a pack of wolves."

He drifted away before the Black Knight finished talking, with some vague idea of seeking a spot in the shadows where he might get a chance to down the famous outlaw without being seen. But Blake was still uneasy, for the past hour he'd had the idea that someone was constantly trailing him. The feeling unseen eyes watched him was ever with him, and yet he was unable to discover any sign of a stalker.

Though Joe Blake didn't have any way of proving that there was good reason for his feeling he was a hunted man, he was quite right. For the past hour Eagle Wing had been constantly trailing the lean gunman. The Indian boy was so clever at this sort of shadowing that not once had he revealed even a hint of his presence to Joe Blake.

Only once had the Navajo lost sight of his quarry. That had been when Blake ducked into an alley which led to the rear of the mining company building. So it was that Eagle Wing did not know that the Dark Knight was inside the building

confronting Henry Maxwell. It was only when he heard the four shots coming from the rear of the building that Eagle Wing started to investigate.

As Blake came running back through the alley the Indian boy flattened himself against the nearest wall. He remained there motionless and unseen as the gunman rushed by him. Had the Navajo known that Blake had apparently shot and killed the Dark Knight he would have been frantic with alarm.

At that moment Eagle Wing had his choice of continuing to follow the man the Dark Knight had told him to trail or go and try and investigate the shooting. The Indian boy decided to continue carrying out his orders. He silently followed Joe Blake on along the street toward the hotel where Trench was in the midst of his angry speech to the swiftly growing crowd. For that reason Eagle Wing actually knew nothing of what occurred at the Goddard Borax Mining Company office.

He was watching and waiting when the Dark Knight finally appeared and rode Ebony straight through the crowd to where Trench stood on the chair making his speech to the mob. As he listened to the masterful way in which the Dark Knight took command of the situation the dark eyes of the Indian boy gleamed with pride. Always the "Senor" knew the right thing to do with words or fists or guns, just as he did now.

Not for a moment did Eagle Wing forget his job was to watch Joe Blake. When the gunman finally left the crowd the Navajo trailed after him. Always the Indian boy moved silently on moccasin-clad feet, clinging to the shadows along the dimly lighted street.

At the upper end of the town Blake flattened himself against the front wall of a deserted, ramshackle old building and waited. Eagle Wing stationed himself out of sight of the gunman nearby and also waited. The only weapon the Indian boy carried was his knife. He had left his rifle back at the hideout when he had come to town late that afternoon.

He glanced down the street as he heard the pounding of hoofs as a rider approached. His heart leaped as he saw it was the Dark Knight. Eagle Wing looked in Joe Blake's direction as Ebony's thundering hoofs grew louder. The Indian boy saw the lean man draw his gun and stand there waiting.

Horror swept over Eagle Wing as he realized Blake intended to drygulch the Dark Knight. There seemed nothing that the Navajo could do to stop his beloved partner of the dim trails from being killed. Blake was just a little too far away, though Eagle Wing was still between the gunman and the Dark Knight, for the Navajo to attempt throwing his knife.

Then as the black-clad man was directly opposite him Eagle Wing did the only thing he could possibly do at the moment.

"Look out, Senor!" he shouted. "Drygulcher! To your right."

Those few words of warning were all the Dark Knight needed. Instantly his right hand Colt came up roaring, just as Blake fired. The man in the saddle had been just a shade quicker than his foe. It was the hand of a dying man that pulled the trigger of Blake's gun. Even before the sound of the shot died away he was falling face forward to the plank walk in front of the old shack, to sprawl there lifeless. His gun still in his hand.

"You all right, Senor?" called Eagle Wing as he came running up. "He didn't hit you?"

"Nope, missed me plumb complete," said the Dark Knight, as he brought Ebony to a prancing halt. "Who was it?"

"Joe Blake, that PDQ cowboy you told me to watch, Senor," said Eagle Wing as he examined the body. "He's dead—you shot him in the heart. What we do with the body?"

"Leave it there," said the Dark Knight. "Folks along the street must have heard the shots and will come to investigate. I don't want them to be asking questions about my killing Blake. No time for that now. Is Johnny Anderson in town?"

"I think so, Senor," said Eagle Wing. "You want me to go look for him?"

"Right," said the Dark Knight. "Bring him to Maxwell's office. I'll try and find Maxwell." He glanced at the windows of the mining company building and saw a faint light. "Looks like Maxwell may be at his office. I'll go see. Get Anderson, Wing. And hurry!"

Swiftly Eagle Wing departed on his mission. The Dark Knight rode Ebony on up the street, and left the great horse hidden behind another building. On foot the outlaw headed

for the mining company office—keeping at the rear of the buildings along the street as he did so.

Down in front of the hotel Sam Trench stopped his senseless smashing of the chair as he heard the sound of two shots coming from the upper end of the street. The hotel keeper lifted his head, his handlebar moustache making him look like a walrus rising from the water.

"What was that?" he demanded, glaring at the clerk who still stood nearby. "Thought I heard shooting."

"You did," said the clerk. "Two shots. They came from up the street in the direction the Dark Knight just rode."

"Come on," snapped Trench. "Let's go see what happened."

The two men hurried up the street to find a few other local citizens had already gathered around the body of Joe Blake by the time they reached the scene.

"Joe Blake, eh?" said Trench. "One of Anderson's cowboys. I knew it!" He again swiftly faced a growing mob. "You wouldn't believe me when I said the Dark Knight is working for Abe Meade, but this proves it. We all know that Meade and Anderson hate each other. That's why this poor devil was killed, because he worked for the PDQ. He tried to defend himself but what chance did he have against a crack-shot like the Dark Knight. Not a chance in the world."

"That's right," agreed the hotel clerk, mingling with the crowd and continuing his job as a "yes" man. "Meade's to blame for all this."

"Of course Abe Meade's to blame," shouted Trench. "And he's still somewhere in the Palace Dance Hall. Come on, men, the Dark Knight said I had a personal reason for wanting to get Meade—and he's right now. How can any of us be sure our lives and property are safe as long as that old hellion is alive? We've got to stop him for good!"

"What about the Dark Knight?" demanded a man in the crowd. "You aim to get him, too, Trench?"

"We'll worry about him later," said Trench. "If he's nothing but a hired gunman working for Meade he'll lose interest when he finds we've strung up his boss. Come on, quit arguing. I told you we've got to get Abe Meade and we can't waste any more time about it."

There came a roar of agreement from the crowd that the hotel keeper had once more succeeded in rousing into an

angry mob. If a body they advanced toward the Palace Dance Hall and exaltation walked with Sam Trench as he strode in the lead of this grim dangerous crowd. Though he was willing to help his boss in every way the hotel clerk was no fool. He followed in the rear of the mob.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

ALL his life Abraham Meade had been a tough and experienced fighter. He had learned the way to win battles was to watch and wait for the right opportunity then get in the first blow. Not for an instant had the tough old rancher forgotten he was in enemy territory. He was sure there wasn't a man in Sand Wells who didn't hate him and he was ready and expecting trouble.

Despite the gambler's gracious and apparently friendly attitude Meade didn't trust Faro Thorpe any further than the old man could throw a full grown elephant. Which was about the only four-legged critter the owner of the Old Anchor considered himself unable to lift off its feet.

Meade found himself in another hallway as Thorpe closed the door leading to the living quarters of Belle Howard. The gambler also found the barrel of the old man's gun prodding him in the back.

"What's the idea, Meade?" said Thorpe quietly, but he was careful not to turn around. "Why the gun?"

"Let's just say because I'm a cautious gent," said Meade. "I've been to town a few times in the past since you took over this place, Thorpe. Even spent a little money here at the Palace gambling, drinking and watching folks dance. Don't recollect your reception in the past was so friendly the thought of it gave me a warm glow on a cold winter night. So I'm wondering."

"Wondering what?" demanded Thorpe.

"Why you suddenly got so big hearted you aim to protect me against the whole town," said Meade, his voice changed and grew hard as he looked toward the stairs. "And what in hell you need with them four mean-faced jaspers who just come up the stairs lookin' like they're loaded for bear?" The old hellion's voice rose to a roar. "Stand hitched right where you are gents, or you will have been working for a dead man."

Faro Thorpe's four gun-guards halted and just stood there

staring as they saw the long barrelled Colt pressing against their boss's back. They agreed with Abe Meade perfectly. They had never heard of a corpse paying much salary.

"Edge around and face the audience, Thorpe," said Meade. "Give the boys a pretty speech about their presence being unneeded, unwanted and tell that pack of mangy polecats to get to hell out of here, pronto!"

"Mr. Meade is right, men," said Thorpe, edging around so that he faced the four men. "I don't know why you came up here now."

"I could guess," said Meade from behind the gambler. "And the thought ain't a pretty one. But speak the rest of the piece, Thorpe."

"Go on back downstairs," snapped Thorpe impatiently. "I don't need you now. Next time wait until I call you before rushing up here where you aren't wanted."

The four gun-guards didn't say anything. They just turned and started back down the stairs, and they didn't even look back.

"That's my friend Thorpe talking," said Meade. "We both hope."

"You're a bull-headed old fool, Meade," said Thorpe, apparently adjusting his necktie as he stood with his back to the old man. "Those men would have helped me protect you if there had been any trouble from the folks in this town, but you made me send them away."

"Sound so good I almost believe it," said Meade. "Probably would if it wasn't for my untrusting nature." He frowned as he heard shooting somewhere off in the distance. "I've changed my mind about staying the night here. That goes for my womenfolks too. And they better do like I say this time."

"All right, Abe," said Thorpe. "Just as you wish. But put your gun away, or at least quit prodding me in the back with it. It's uncomfortable."

"Sorry," said Meade, stepping back and lowering his gun. "Maybe I have been acting a bit hasty."

"Perhaps," said the gambler.

Thorpe swung around and Meade found himself staring at the muzzle of a pearl handled .38 that was aimed right at his heart.

"Drop your gun, Meade," said Thorpe calmly. "I can fire and kill you before you can raise it to shooting level."

Meade uttered an angry roar, but he let his old single action Colt fall to the floor.

"So I been right about you all the time," he shouted. "You been playing a crooked game right from the start."

Thorpe didn't bother to deny anything. He took a silver whistle from his pocket with his free hand and blew a shrill blast on it. In a matter of moments the four gunmen came racing back up the stairs, and Belle Howard followed them right up.

"All right," said Thorpe. "I've got him now. One of you pick up his gun."

"I hate a liar, Faro," Belle said bitterly as she stood watching. "You assured Abe Meade that you would protect him if he remained here for the night—and now this!"

"Told you to let me play the hand my way, Belle," said Thorpe impatiently. "You keep out of this. Go up the other stairs and unbolt the door from the other side. I want Meade's cousins to be listening while I have a little talk with him."

"And suppose I refuse?" demanded Belle defiantly.

"Break that door down men," ordered Thorpe, still covering Meade with his gun.

"No, don't do that," protested Belle. "I'll go and unlock the door. The noise would frighten Mary Burke so badly it might kill her."

The dance hall hostess turned and hurried down the stairs.

"I've seen rattlesnakes I liked a heap better than I do you, Thorpe," said Meade. "At least they signal you before striking. What do you want of n anyway? You sure ain't worrying about Maxwell getting the land for the right-of-way."

"I'll tell you that in a few minutes," said Thorpe. "Just as soon as Belle opens that door."

"Sounds like I might be more useful to you alive than dead," said Meade.

"You are," admitted Thorpe frankly. "But all the same I wouldn't hesitate to kill you if you get out of hand."

"Unhuh," said the old hellion. "Then let's have some fun while we're waiting."

Abruptly he made a grab at a gun-guard standing close to him. Meade caught the man by both ankles and then came

up swinging the guard like a baseball bat. Another gunman went down as the human bat struck him in the chest. Meade completed the swing and knocked Faro Thorpe back against the wall and the fancy .38 went flying out of the gambler's hand.

"That's it!" shouted Meade delightedly. "Let's play tough."

Behind the old giant a guard carrying a sawed-off shotgun went into action. He brought the butt of the gun down on Meade's head hard. The old rancher dropped the man he held by the ankles and then his knees buckled and he went down hard as he lapsed into unconsciousness.

Thorpe and the other two men scrambled to their feet, bruised and dazed and shaken.

"They sure are right when they call him an old hellion," said one of the gun-guards who was unhurt. "I'm glad he didn't tangle with me."

Henry Maxwell again sat in his office trying to think things out. If only the Dark Knight had told him who was using him for a dupe the mining manager was sure he would be far more certain regarding the next move he should make. Maxwell found himself wishing the masked man would seek him out again and reveal this vital piece of information.

All the same Maxwell was taking no chances of being surprised again by unexpected visitors. Both the front and rear doors of the building were locked from the inside. The windows were closed, but Maxwell had forgotten to draw the shades.

He rose to his feet, and drew his gun as he heard someone knocking on the back door. He went to the door and stood there for a moment before he spoke.

"Who is it?" he called.

"The Dark Knight," came that strange harsh voice from the other side of the door. "Let me in, Maxwell."

"All right," said Maxwell. "Just a moment."

He unlocked the door and opened it. The black-clad outlaw stepped in and Maxwell shoved the door shut and locked it.

"I'm glad you came back," said Maxwell. "And glad you are still alive. I thought you were dead there for a while."

"Thanks," said the Dark Knight dryly. "I'm also glad

that I'm still alive. There's been another attempt on my life since I saw you last, Maxwell. A cowboy named Joe Blake tried to drygulch me and I had to kill him. I'm sure Blake was the same mah who tried to get me from this back door."

"Who's the man who has been using me for a tool?" demanded Maxwell. "I've been worrying and wondering about that ever since I saw you last."

"His name is Faro Thorpe," said the Dark Knight.

"Thorpe?" exclaimed Maxwell in amazement. "I can't believe it! What has Thorpe to gain?"

"That I want you to learn for yourself," said the Dark Knight. "At this very moment I'm sure Thorpe has Abe Meade cornered upstairs over the Palace Dance Hall."

"Cornered?" said Maxwell. "But why?"

"Because Thorpe is doubtlessly rushing through the deal he has been aiming at ever since Meade filed on the mineral rights of Eagle Pass to block your condemnation move."

"Can you prove this?" Maxwell demanded anxiously. "If you can Faro Thorpe will find himself in plenty of trouble."

"You're not the only man who requires proof," said the Dark Knight. "Come with me. The other man is out in the alley."

"Who is it?" asked Maxwell.

"John Anderson."

"Lead the way," said Maxwell grimly. "We'll go out the back door."

He blew out the new lamp he had placed on the desk and in the darkness the two men headed for the back door. The mining company manager unlocked it and they stepped out.

In the alley behind the mine office two figures were dimly visible as they waited in the shadows. Instantly the hands of the Dark Knight and Maxwell went to the butts of their guns. They were taking no chances until they were sure whether they had encountered friends or foes. Then the Dark Knight recognized the white garb of one of the men in the shadows.

"Wing?" called the Dark Knight softly. "Did you find him?"

"Here I am, Dark Knight," spoke up John Anderson.

"Did you tell Anderson what happened to Joe Blake?" demanded the Dark Knight.

"He did," said Anderson before Eagle Wing could answer.

"And it's hard to believe Joe would try to drygulch you and you had to kill him in self-defence."

"It's true," said the Dark Knight. "And there's more to the whole story, but we have no time to go into it now."

"I just can't believe Blake has been working under cover for Thorpe," said Anderson. "even though this Indian boy told me about it. I'm still not convinced" Faro, Thorpe is a crook in spite of what Steve Morton told me."

"You would have known by this time, if Hardwick and Blake hadn't made the mistake of killing the wrong man yesterday morning," said the Dark Knight. "And you might have been in trouble. Anderson."

"If that's so, why won't Thorpe kill Meade tonight?" asked the young owner of the PDQ.

"He may intend doing so, but the set-up is different now," answered the Dark Knight. "Meade has relatives tonight who will inherit if the old man dies. When he ordered Meade's death yesterday, Thorpe didn't know this. But we waste time in talking. Let's go. Wing, your job now is to find Marshal Quigley and bring him to the dance hall as quickly as you can."

"Bueno, Senor," said Eagle Wing. "Better move fast. Trench has stirred up another mob. I hear talk when looking for Anderson. Hotel man claims Meade hired Dark Knight to kill Joe Blake. Mob going to dance hall to get Meade and lynch him."

"Good Lord!" exclaimed the Dark Knight tensely. "I didn't know that. I thought I had the mob quieted down. Get the marshal, Wing—and hurry!"

The Indian boy just nodded and faded swiftly into the night.

"Come on," said the Dark Knight to Anderson and Maxwell. "We've got to move fast. We can't let that mob reach the dance hall first."

"Listen!" said Maxwell. "Hear that roaring and shouting? The mob is already on the way." He suddenly groaned. "Belle Howard. Belle got Sally and her mother over to the Palace. Is she in cahoots with Faro Thorpe?"

The three men were talking in low tones as they headed for the rear of the dance hall.

"Belle Howard is simply another of Thorpe's tools," said the Dark Knight. "Things just happened to work out this

way. She's no more to blame than anybody else. Be quiet as we reach the back end of the dance hall. I'd better warn you both that we're heading right into danger. I'll try to protect you, but I sure can't guarantee your safety."

"If we aren't safe, then what you claim is true," said Anderson sagely. "In that case, I can stand on my own hind feet and bust a few caps, and to hell with Marshal Quigley."

"Just show me proof," said Maxwell. "I'll settle with Abe Meade later."

As silently as stalking Indians the trio made their way along the black alley and neared the darkened rear of the dance hall and saloon. There was no moon and a cloudy overcast made the starshine negligible. As they passed a vacant lot they could see men gathering in the front street, shouting and looking wildly fierce under the flickering and flaming torches some of them carried. Several of them had ropes. They were snake-dancing and singing, "Hang old Abe Meade to a sycamore tree," to the tune of *John Brown's Body*.

"Say, those crazy fools mean business," muttered Anderson. "I should of killed Sam Trench last night in the hotel when he first started this. What's his stake in this game, anyway, Dark Knight?"

"Faro Thorpe couldn't do it all alone," said the Dark Knight succinctly. "Soft now. Here we are."

"What's your plan?" asked Maxwell softly.

"We're going in and surprise Mr. Thorpe. Careful. The back door is probably guarded."

They moved on like phantoms in the dark. Then, just as they reached the corner of the building, Maxwell's foot clicked against a tin can.

Instantly there was a startled movement at the dance hall door, and a man's voice called out tersely.

"Who's there?"

When there was no answer, he called again. "Speak quick, or I'll shoot."

"Shoot and be damned!" cried out Maxwell savagely, and he launched himself forward in a lumbering charge.

"Fool!" hissed the Dark Knight angrily, leaping after him.

The door guard was as good as his word. A tongue of orange flame lanced the night as his gun roared once, and

then again. In the flashes the guard and the burly figure of the charging Maxwell were outlined. Then the guard, having located his attacker, levelled his gun to fire pointblank in Maxwell's face.

He never pulled the trigger. Sighting in the dark by the now faded gun flashes, the Dark Knight leaped to one side to get around Maxwell's body and fired once.

That was all. The guard let out a monstrous grunt, indication that he had just taken a full breath to yell an alarm, and then he crashed to the ground.

In stepping back Maxwell almost fell over another object on the ground. He uttered a startled exclamation and struck a match. It was the body of Joe Blake lying there, no far from the dead guard.

"Blake!" exclaimed Anderson. "What's he doing here?"

"I don't know," said the Dark Knight. "Unless some of the men in the mob brought the body and left it back here with the intention of confronting Abe Meade with the corpse."

"This other man was just one of Thorpe's gun guards," said Maxwell, examining the other corpse in the light of a second match. "Seen him around but didn't know his name."

The Dark Knight knelt beside Blake's body and ripped open the shirt. He uttered a sound of intense satisfaction as he revealed something strapped around the dead man's waist. It was a snakeskin money belt.

"Stanley Burke's money belt, I think you will find this," said the Dark Knight "proof enough that Blake was the other killer who trapped Burke."

"Say, I bet that's what Morton was looking for on Hardwick," exclaimed Anderson.

"Possibly," said the Dark Knight. "At least, here's the first part of your proof."

"Let's go," said Maxwell, lurching to his feet as a third match he held went out. He fell against the door, fumbled for the latch, and then flung the barrier wide open.

A flood of soft lamplight yellowed the opening, and the two men behind him could see Maxwell swaying slightly in the doorway. Blood was running down his left arm and dripping to the threshold from his finger-tips.

"Maxwell!" jerked out Anderson. "He's been hit."

"Only a flesh wound in the arm," said Maxwell, clenching

his left hand and raising the arm to show that he could still use it. "Come on." And like a maddened bull that could not be swerved aside, he strode grimly toward the dance hall archway, dripping blood with each step he took.

Just as the Dark Knight and Anderson leaped after him there came the sound of a crescendo of galloping hoofs out in the front street and the shouts of angry men mingled with the bellowing of gun-shots.

Nobody was in the rear part of the dance hall, all being clustered toward the front of the house watching the excitement on the street. Thus, the trio of determined men almost reached the archway before they were discovered.

One of six men who were guarding the foot of the stairs glanced around and saw them. He let out a wild yell of surprise and consternation as his gaze centred on the black-clad figure that had taken the lead in front of Maxwell and Anderson.

"The Dark Knight!" he shouted, and began firing his gun feverishly.

In an instant the place was filled with the roaring of six-guns and the acrid odour of blinding gunsmoke. Two of the stair defenders fell before the accurate fire of the Dark Knight and Anderson. The others, panic-stricken by the sight of that tall, black-robed avenger, flanked by two grim-looking men with blazing guns, broke and ran on through the saloon. One of them tried to escape up the stairs to warn Faro Thorpe, and Maxwell lunged after him. Catching him halfway up the steps, the berserk mine manager plucked him off the stairs with his right hand like a fly and dropped him over the railing to the floor below. Then Maxwell continued heavily on his way.

The Dark Knight would have preferred to clean out the saloon before penetrating further into the lion's lair. It was never safe to leave armed enemies on your back-trail, but Maxwell was forcing the issue. So, after a quick glance through the smoke-filled and rapidly emptying saloon the Dark Knight took the stairs three steps at a time.

"Guard the stairs!" he yelled at Anderson.

But the redhead only laughed derisively and plunged up the steps in his wake.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

IN Belle Howard's living room a strange scene was being enacted. Once more conscious, and with a raging headache that did not decrease his anger to any extent, Abraham Meade sat glaring at Faro Thorpe. Flanking the saloon owner were two of his muscular housemen, both armed with sawed-off shotguns. Since one of them had been used by Meade as a human baseball bat, and the other had been hit for a rather weird home-run, their love for the old rancher was a decidedly minus quality. They both were just as willing to fill him full of lead as they were to look at him.

Over against the wall Belle Howard stood with one arm about Sally Burke and the other around the girl's trembling mother. As she watched and listened Belle realized that in spite of the fact he was unarmed and in danger Abe Meade dominated the whole scene. He was like a magnificent stag at bay.

"All right, Thorpe," he said. "Let's get this over with. Maybe it makes you feel important to strut around giving orders to a lot of armed men—and scaring my womenfolks, but to me a man who acts the way you've done ain't got the breeding of a stray dog."

"Why, Abe," said Belle with a mocking smile. "You shouldn't say that to Faro. He might forget he's a gentleman."

"Shut up, Belle," said Thorpe, and just the way he said it blotted out all his chances of ever meaning anything to her. "You keep out of this." He looked at Meade. "Now let's get down to cases."

"Go ahead," said Meade. "I always did like to hear a tin-horn talk. Soon as you finish maybe you'll let me and my womenfolks get out of here."

"Perhaps," said Thorpe. "I've a little business matter to transact with you first. I have here—" he drew a folded paper from his inside pocket—"an agreement made between you and the late George Anderson. It has been endorsed over to me. You doubtlessly recall the terms of it."

The old rancher quieted down, perhaps sensing what was to come. He settled his huge head down between his shoulders, glared at the gambler and waited.

"I'll refresh your mind," went on Thorpe easily. "Upon the payment of five thousand dollars with this document you are to surrender the Old Anchor ranch, lock, stock and barrel. Here is the paper. And here is five thousand dollars in gold." The gambler produced a heavy buckskin bag from where it dangled at his waist and tossed it onto the table close beside the old ranchman.

"That deal was made with the Anderson family," said Abe Meade harshly. "Not with a skunk like you."

"Using ugly names seems rather futile under the circumstances, Meade," said Thorpe coldly. "You'll deal with me because this paper is endorsed to me, and because I have the money. You will find a quitclaim deed to the ranch, properly made out, on that table. Sit down and sign it."

"I'll see you in hell first," roared the old man.

He didn't move from his chair, yet the two shotgun guards backed away nervously even though they stood across the room from Abe Meade. Faro Thorpe scowled, and ran his long white fingers through his blond hair. From the first the old rancher had proved far more difficult than the gambler had expected. Thorpe was both angry and impatient.

"Listen, you old bull," Thorpe said. "This paper is legal, and you know I can take it to any court and whip you on it. But—— you haven't got time."

"Time for what?" asked Meade.

"To stall, to refuse to complete this deal with me," said Thorpe impatiently. "You are in danger every moment."

"Sure," said Meade. "From you and those gun dummy guards over there."

"No, not from me and my men," said Thorpe. "But from everybody else in Sand Wells. You had no business coming to town at all. The whole countryside is up in arms against you. The only way you can save your neck is to get out of town fast."

"And what happens if I turn the ranch over to you?" demanded the old hellion.

"The first thing I'll do will be to sell the Goddard Company a spur right-of-way through Eagle Pass at a nominal price,"

said Thorpe. "If you're smart, you'll take this money and those two women and high-tail it out of this part of the country."

"No!" said Meade hoarsely. "No, I won't do it. Where's John Anderson? I want to hear that young fool admit he gave you his claim to the Old Anchor."

"Abe! Abe!" appealed Mary Burke apprehensively. "Don't refuse if it's on account of Sally and me. Don't worry about us."

Meade shot a kindly glance at her and then looked once more at Thorpe. "Lemme see that paper," he said craftily.

"I'll hold it," said Thorpe. "You might get some foolish notion of trying to destroy it. You can see its authenticity and endorsement without handling it."

"All right," capitulated the old man after squinting at the agreement. "I'll sign. Glad to get shut of the danged old place, anyhow."

He sat down heavily at the table and ran his eyes over the quitclaim deed there. Suddenly he jumped up with a renewed roaring.

"This here thing includes assignment to all mineral rights," he shouted.

"Exactly," agreed Thorpe pleasantly. "As if you didn't know the gold mine is what I'm after."

"Well, you'll never get it," said Abe Meade grimly.

For answer Thorpe walked over to the nearest window and drew it open. He flung out his arm with a sweep to indicate the wave of sound below.

"Hear that?" he asked. "Hear the shouts and shots? It isn't for the Fourth of July, you know."

"Wh-what is it?" cried Sally Burke fearfully.

"A mob of angry citizens," explained Thorpe, shrugging. "They want to lynch Abe Meade. All we have to do is invite them in to take him."

"You wouldn't dare!" exclaimed Belle, glaring at Thorpe. "I've always suspected you'd stoop pretty low to get what you wanted, but this is hard to believe."

"Keep out of this, Belle," snapped Thorpe. "I told you that before. If you don't—you may regret it later." He turned to the old rancher. "Listen to that noise. You know what that means, Meade. If you don't want your neck stretched

and these two kinswomen of yours thrown to that mob, you'll waste no more time. Sign that quitclaim!"

For one of the few times in his cantankerous life Abe Meade turned pale as he listened to the angry sound of the mob down in the street.

"Who's incitin' that bunch of crazy fools?" he demanded.

"Not that it makes any difference," answered Thorpe, "but it is Sam Trench. He hates you intensely, you know, Meade."

"I begin to understand," said Abe Meade bitterly. "You and Trench and Anderson are in cahoots to rob me. And that's the thanks I get for holdin' the Old Anchor together all in one piece."

"You should talk of robbery," said Thorpe coldly. "After the fleecing you gave George Anderson. Running up a big bill against him for finding a gold mine and then not giving him his mine."

"All right," said Meade resignedly, again seating himself at the table. "I'll sign. You guarantee to get me and my womenfolks to safety?"

"I'll let you out the back door and try to quell the mob," promised Thorpe. "I don't want to see anybody hurt."

"Gimme a pen," said Abe Meade grimly.

There was a tremendous crash as a pair of bodies hurled against the hall door. The barrier splintered inward as the blood spattered figure of Henry Maxwell stumbled across the threshold amid the wreckage. A tall man in black and wearing a mask leaped around the mine manager and landed in a gun-fighting crouch in the room.

"Don't sign anything. Abraham Meade!" he shouted. "This man is the devil who had Stanley Burke killed!"

"The Dark Knight!" exclaimed Abe Meade.

With the sound of the crashing door Faro Thorpe whirled like a striking snake, his hands darting beneath his coat and coming forth with his pair of matched .38 revolvers. The two men with sawed-off shotguns acted likewise.

"The Dark Knight?" exclaimed the gambler, his face blanching. Then he slowly began backing toward the table. "Gun that outlaw down!" he yelled at his men.

And gun thunder broke loose in the room. A huge chunk of ceiling and one side of the wall by the door were torn away as the two murderous shotguns belched fire and buck-

shot. But the Dark Knight remained unscathed save for a couple of small shot that stung one arm. He had fired first, blasting the nearer shotgun artist to his problematical reward just before the guard pulled the trigger. Anderson, coming in through the doorway behind the Robin Hood outlaw, shot the second shotgun guard in unison with the Dark Knight.

Quick as a flash, Abe Meade reached out and grappled with Faro Thorpe before the gambler could level down on him and use him for a shield. But the gambler was every bit as wily and tough as he was reputed to be.

"Let go, you old fool!" Thorpe snarled. "Take your hands off me or I'll kill you."

The shotgun blasts had weakened the hanging oil lamp that was the only light in the living room of Belle Howard's suite. Abruptly the lamp broke loose from its moorings and fell to the floor. It just missed Abe Meade's head by inches as he still struggled with Faro Thorpe. The old hellion had the gambler by both wrists, and was twisting, trying to force Thorpe to drop his guns.

The lamp was still burning when it hit the floor. Meade kicked it hard without realizing what had been in the way of his left boot. He sent flames and kerosene scattering all over the place. In a matter of seconds the rug was on fire.

"Fire!" screamed Mary Burke. "We'll all be burned to death"

"Meade—Thorpe!" shouted the Dark Knight. "Quit that fighting. We've got to get these women out of here fast."

"He's right," roared Meade, releasing his grip on Thorpe's wrists. "We can finish this later, Thorpe."

"This is your finish right now, Meade," snarled Thorpe as he found his arms were free. He raised his two .38s, aiming one at the old man's head the other at his heart. "You'll never sign the ranch and the gold mine over to me"

The only light in the room now was the weird glow of the flames as they flickered across the rug, licked at drapes and walls with red and yellow tongues.

Instantly the Dark Knight was behind the gambler. The long barrel of one of the masked man's guns caught Thorpe across the base of the neck in a sort of rabbit punch. The gambler's guns dropped from his hands unfired.

"Grab him, Meade," ordered the Dark Knight. "He's out cold. Get him out of here—we need him for evidence."

Anderson had rushed over to where the three women were standing, staring at the flames around them in blank horror that held them motionless.

"It's all right, Sally," said Anderson. "We'll get you out of here safely."

Sally turned her dark eyes in his direction, as though not quite certain whose voice she had heard above the crackling of the fire. Then as she recognised the young redhead there was relief on her pretty face.

"Oh, Johnny," she said. "I'm so glad you are here."

Then he had lifted her up in his strong arms and was carrying her swiftly through the smoke and flame to the hallway leading to the stairs. As she stared at the strong, tanned face, the mop of red hair Sally Burke fell madly in love, though there was no time to realize it at the moment.

"Mother!" she exclaimed. "Where is she? Don't leave her behind, Johnny!"

"She's all right, Sally," Anderson said. "The Dark Knight is taking care of her."

Sally glanced over his shoulder and saw he was right. The Dark Knight was carrying her mother, while Abe Meade had gone on ahead with the unconscious gambler thrown across one shoulder like a sack of meal. Belle and Maxwell were making their way out together, but the blood-stained manager made no attempt to carry the dance hall hostess to safety.

There were breathless moments when it seemed they would never get past the flickering flames, then at last the fire was behind them. It was still confined to the living room of Belle's suite and they were out in the hall.

Some of the armed men who had been down in the dance hall were grim, sinister figures as they appeared suddenly at the head of the stairs. They uttered excited shouts and were ready to shoot as they saw the Dark Knight and Abe Meade. It was Belle Howard who instantly took command of the situation.

"Put those guns away, you fools," she snapped with plenty of authority in her voice. "Get busy fighting that fire before

the whole place burns down. There's water in the pitchers and basins on this floor."

"Why is Meade carrying the boss like that?" demanded one of the men suspiciously.

"Because Meade rescued Thorpe from the fire, you idiot," snapped Belle impatiently. "Stop arguing—and get to work, all of you. Those are my orders and I'm half owner here."

"She's right," shouted another gun guard. "Get busy."

They put their guns away and rushed back toward the burning living room without even a second glance at the four men, the still unconscious gambler and the three women.

"Keep going," said the Dark Knight softly. "We should never underestimate the power of a woman, or put too much faith in it being permanent at a time like this."

"And you're so right," said Belle. "Hurry—down the stairs and out the back way through the dance hall. Where we go from there I don't quite know."

"I do," said Meade as he started down the stairs still carrying Thorpe's limp form. "We head for the Old Anchor."

"Put me down, Johnny," said Sally. "I'm all right—I can walk now. Besides it—it might be better if you and Mr. Maxwell were sure of being able to use your guns."

"Sally is right," said Mary Burke bravely. "Put me down, Mr. Dark Knight. I can walk, too."

Anderson and the Dark Knight obeyed the requests. They were conscious of faces staring at them from the direction of the bar. Men who had been in the place, and the dance hall girls, all watched and waited as if for the second act curtain to rise on some strange and tense drama.

The redhead's hand flashed to his gun as he saw a man in the group raise a sawed-off shotgun and aim at Abe Meade's broad back as the old rancher strode on across the dance floor toward the rear door. Anderson's Colt roared—and the man with the shotgun pitched forward, dead before he could pull the trigger.

"You locoed, or what?" demanded Meade, looking back over his shoulder. "Now you have started real trouble, Johnny."

"Had to do it, Abe," said Anderson. "He was going to shoot you in the back."

"Huh?" exclaimed Meade. "And you saved my life!" He

grinned. "Shucks, son, you keep doing things like that and I'll never use that headstone you had made."

From the crowd in the saloon there rose an angry roar. It was one thing to be merely spectators, but when one of their number was killed by a bullet that came dangerously close to the whole group they objected violently. Half of those present had not even noticed that the man with the shotgun had been aiming at Meade's back. They didn't know exactly what happened, save that a man had been killed by John Anderson, and the owner of the PDQ had come bursting in here with the Dark Knight and Maxwell just a little while ago.

"Stop them!" shouted one of the men in the crowd. "Don't let them get out the back way until we learn the right of this."

"That's right," called out another man. "Looks like they knocked Thorpe out, the way Meade's carrying him. They're kidnapping the boss."

Belle dashed ahead and opened the rear door that someone had closed and locked since Maxwell, Anderson and the masked outlaw had entered that way. The Dark Knight swung around and covered those who started pouring in from the bar section of the building with his guns.

"Stay back, all of you!" he called out. "Take it easy and no one will be hurt."

As Belle flung the door open there came a roar from the rear of the building. Some of the mob that had been milling around outside the Palace dance hall seeking to get in were sure they had found their chance.

"Hell's bells!" roared Abe Meade, dropping Thorpe to the floor and rushing forward slamming the door closed. "We sure got ourselves out of the fire and into the frying pan. Which may be backwards, out plumb true!"

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

THERE was something about the Black Knight as he stood there facing the small crowd that slowed their advance. Every man present felt those two blue-barrelled .45s were aimed directly at him, as the Robin Hood outlaw moved his guns from side to side.

Meade quickly locked the rear door, but the mob out back had grown frantic now, for they had caught a glimpse of the old hellion before he slammed the portal closed in their faces. They were shouting and pounding on the door, trying to smash it down.

In the excitement only Belle saw Faro Thorpe as the gambler finally regained consciousness and got weakly to his feet. He looked at her dazedly as she stepped nearer to him.

"What—what happened?" he asked. "We were in your living room—there was a fire. I remember now. I was arguing with Meade when somebody knocked me out."

"You mean you were about to kill Meade when the Dark Knight changed your mind with a gun barrel," said Belle. "Meade's a better man than you are, Faro. He carried you downstairs instead of leaving you to burn to death."

"I'm very grateful," said Thorpe. "But what's the trouble here now?"

"We were trying to leave by the back door," said Maxwell suddenly stepping forward and standing close to Belle. "But the mob is out there—the mob your good friend Sam Trench stirred up. They want Abe Meade and the Dark Knight. So we can't leave that way."

"How unfortunate," said Thorpe. "Under the circumstances you can hardly expect me to burst into tears." He felt in an inside pocket and discovered the deed to the Old Anchor and the quitclaim were still in his possession. "I haven't changed my mind about wanting that gold mine."

"I've been thinking, Faro," said Belle. "It might be nice

to be married to a man who owns a gold mine. But I'd expect him to have brains, not been just a cheap, greedy killer at heart."

"I'm sorry you feel that way, Belle," said Maxwell bitterly. "I guess you and Thorpe have been closer partners than I realized."

Belle realized that Sally and Mary were also staring at her in disgust, as was Anderson and Meade but she merely smiled.

"Always I've had to think of myself first," she said. "And I'll still do that when there's a chance of being rich." She looked at Thorpe. "I'm sure Mr. Meade is more willing to listen to reason now than ever, Faro, if you approach him in the right way."

"What do you mean, Belle?" demanded Thorpe.

"When Mr. Meade agreed to sign those papers up in my rooms you promised you would get him and his womenfolk to safety," said Belle. "You might show you still mean that by getting rid of that bunch over there the Dark Knight is guarding."

"How about it, Meade?" asked Thorpe. "Even though I have been accused of instigating the killing of your cousin Stanley Burke—and mind you I don't admit having a thing to do with it—are you still willing to deal with me?"

Meade scowled and then nodded. He had glanced at Belle as she stood a little to one side of the gambler and he had seen her deliberately wink.

"All right, Thorpe," said Meade. "You see to it that Sally, Mary and me get back to the ranch safe before morning and I'll sign that quitclaim and accept your five thousand in gold."

"I was a fool to sell you that deed to pay off my gambling debts," said Anderson bitterly. "Might have known you'd pull some dirty trick with it, Thorpe."

"Let's argue later," said Thorpe. "I've some business to attend to now." He deliberately walked over and stood beside the small crowd in the archway. "While there has been some shooting here tonight I must ask you to all calm down now. While they are here Abe Meade, the Dark Knight and the others with them are my personal guests and I don't want any of you to bother them or me. That will be all, ladies and gentlemen. For the next half hour the drinks are on the house."

Free liquor was all the crowd needed to make the whole bunch head back into the saloon. The Dark Knight looked at Faro Thorpe with a question in the eyes that peered through the eyeholes in the mask. He had not been close enough to hear the conversation of the others.

"Your personal guests," said the Dark Knight. "What's the idea, Thorpe?"

"Simply that Abe Meade and I have reached an agreement," said Thorpe with a smug smile. "In exchange for the safety of Mrs. and Miss Burke I get the old Anchor and the gold mine."

"I see," said the Dark Knight coldly as he dropped his guns back into the holsters. "Then the fact that you hired Hardwick and Blake to kill Stanley Burke doesn't matter to Meade?"

"You've merely accused me of hiring those men," said Thorpe. "You haven't presented any proof as yet that they were in my employ or that they actually killed Burke."

The others had drawn close and were listening as the gambler and the Dark Knight talked. The mob outside had stopped trying to break down the back door but the rumble of voices could still be heard outside the rear of the dance hall.

"But there is proof that Joe Blake was one of the killers," said John Anderson. "Though I hate to admit it about one of my own outfit. Show them the money belt you took off Blake's body, Dark Knight."

"Here it is," said the Dark Knight pulling out the money belt made of snakeskin he had stuffed inside his shirt. "I'm sure this belonged to Stanley Burke."

"Let me see," Sally stepped forward and stared at the belt. "Yes, I'm sure that's the belt Dad always wore."

"I have no doubt of it," said Mary Burke. "He was wearing it yesterday morning when he left the hotel. He had two hundred and thirty-eight dollars in that belt—all the money we had in the world."

"Suppose you see if the money is still there, Mrs. Burke," said the Dark Knight handing her the belt. "It hasn't been opened since I took it off Joe Blake's body."

Mrs. Burke searched through the compartments of the belt and then she swayed and looked like she was about to faint. Sally grabbed her and held her up.

"There's no money in the belt now," said Mary Burke weakly. "It is all gone."

"So that's it," said Faro Thorpe quickly. "All this talk about Burke having been killed by mistake because of his resemblance to his cousin Abe Meade is a lot of nonsense. His death was a plain case of murder and highway robbery."

"How do you figure that?" asked Meade.

"Because of the money belt being found empty," said Thorpe. "If this PDQ cowboy Joe Blake was wearing the money belt he obviously was the robber." The gambler frowned. "But a moment or so ago Anderson said, 'Show them the money belt you took off Blake's body, Dark Knight'. Does that mean Blake is dead?"

"He is," said the Dark Knight. "I killed him in self-defence when he tried to drygulch me earlier tonight."

At the moment the Dark Knight found himself confronted by one of the most baffling situations he had ever encountered in the whole course of his hectic career. He had unmasked Faro Thorpe as the man who had instigated the death of Stanley Burke, who had Joe Blake and Mike Hardwick as his murderous hirelings, and yet now the gambler had suavely and cleverly refuted all the charges against him.

With Blake and Hardwick both dead there was no way of getting them to admit they had been working for Faro Thorpe. Even though he was certain of this fact the Dark Knight had no actual evidence which would prove the two killers had been employed by the gambler.

"So that's what happened to Blake," said Thorpe. He glanced up as the gun guards who had been fighting the fire came down the stairs. They looked a bit singed but happy.

"Fire's out," said one of them. "No danger of it starting up again, don't likely seem."

"We kept it from getting any further than your living room," Miss Howard," said another man proudly. "Sure made a mess of that room though—and Brown and Grayson are both dead. Looks like somebody shot 'em before the fire started."

"Somebody did," said Thorpe dryly. "All right, boys, thanks. You did a nice job from what you say, now go have a few drinks on the house."

The gun-guards all headed for the bar. From outside the building there came a different series of noises from the mob

that was still waiting to storm the Palace dance hall and saloon and get Abe Meade and the Dark Knight. There were shouts, the sound of horses' hoofs and then the concentrated roar of gun-fire, as if the men outside were suddenly battling among themselves.

"I can't get you away from here now, Meade," said Thorpe. "The mob has the place surrounded. We'll have to wait until they quiet down. You all are safe enough here. Suppose we go up to my rooms and then we can finish up the business about the ranch being turned over to me."

"I—I would like to go somewhere and lie down for a little while," said Mary Burke. "The excitement and all has made me feel terribly weak."

"Why not take the ladies back to your quarters, Belle?" suggested Thorpe. "They will be quite safe there, now the fire has been put out. Besides I imagine they have a few personal belongings they'd like to take with them when they leave."

"Of course," said Sally. "Our clothes and all."

"All right," said Belle. "Come on, Sally and Mary, we'll go back to my rooms."

The three women went back up the stairs, while Thorpe led Meade, Anderson, Maxwell and the Dark Knight back through the now empty gambling rooms to another flight of stairs leading to the gambler's living quarters on the second floor of the building.

"You still claim you had nothing to do with the murder of Stanley Burke?" the Dark Knight asked the gambler as the group reached Thorpe's living room. "That Blake and Hardwick weren't your men?"

"Of course," said Thorpe coldly. "As I pointed out before, Stanley Burke was obviously held up by men who intended robbing him. When he resisted they killed him. If Blake and Hardwick were the robbers I'm sure there was a third man working with them."

"A third man?" said Maxwell, whose wounded arm had stopped bleeding some time ago, but the mine manager was still a gory looking mess. "Who do you mean?"

"That fellow Steve Morton," said Thorpe. "From the very moment he arrived in town yesterday, a total stranger, he started asking questions—and from all I've heard he's been around when anything happened."

Once again the Dark Knight found himself in a difficult position. He couldn't come to the defence of Steve Morton without making all these men start wondering how the Dark Knight knew so much about the tall, dark wandering cowboy. Yet Thorpe seemed to be doing very well in building up suspicion against Morton.

"Rot, Farb!" said Anderson impatiently. "You may be able to pull the wool over these other men's eyes, but you're not fooling me none. You must think we all got short memories."

"What are you talking about, Anderson?" demanded Thorpe curtly.

"About the way you reared up like a spooky horse at first sight of the Dark Knight and yelled at your shotgun guards to 'gun that outlaw down'," said the redhead. "They both got killed trying it—and the way you talked to Abe Meade and tried to draw down on him before the Dark Knight knocked you out proved you're sure no little dove of peace."

"You seem to have recovered from you lasting hate for Abe Meade in a hurry, Anderson," said the gambler. "Why should a man who paid for his coffin and tombstone worry if Meade nearly got shot?"

"Because Abe is three times the man I can ever hope to be," said Anderson. "And even if he did cheat my father out of a gold mine, I'm sick of acting like a spoiled brat about the whole thing."

"That's George Anderson's boy talkin'," said Meade with a twinkle in his eye. "And me and his Dad always got along fine."

"Now how about signing this quitclaim to the Old Anchor, Meade?" demanded the gambler drawing the paper from the inside pocket of his coat. "Don't forget you agreed to do so."

"That's right, I did," said Meade. "After you got me and my womenfolks away from here safely. You haven't done that yet, Thorpe. I'm not signing any papers until you do."

"But I told you we would have to wait until later, that I can't get you out through the mob," protested Thorpe. "You might as well sign this paper now and get it over with, Meade."

"Where's the five thousand in gold dust?" demanded the old hellion.

"Why—why, it was on the table in Belle's living room"

when the fire started," said Thorpe. "Didn't anyone grab it when you all got out of there?"

"Nope," said Meade and the other men shook their heads.

"Good Lord," exclaimed the gambler. "I better go see what happened to that gold. I'll be right back."

He dashed out of the room, leaving the door open behind him. He was heading for the door leading to the hallway of Belle Howard's living quarters.

"You really believe all that stuff Thorpe has been telling us, Abe?" asked Maxwell.

"Shucks, no," snorted Meade. "He's been lying faster than a horse can trot, but as long as he thinks we believe him the safer we are until we all get out of here."

"Meade's right about that," said the Dark Knight. "I still insist that Thorpe hired Blake and Hardwick."

"I'm willing to agree with you," said Maxwell. "But the trouble is there seems no way of proving it."

"Then we'll have to find a way," said the Dark Knight. "You realize of course that in going to get the gold Thorpe also has a chance to get his guns if they weren't damaged by the fire."

"So he has," said Anderson. "And we better be ready for trouble when he comes back."

"Listen!" said the Dark Knight. "Somebody coming up the stairs in a hurry. Quiet, all of you."

"Faro!" called out the voice of Sam Trench. "There's hell to pay outside. I had the mob all worked up and they were about to break in here when those three Texas cowboys who work for Meade showed up and started shooting up the crowd. Most of the mob had enough and left."

"Why did you come in here looking for me now, you blithering idiot?" demanded Thorpe. "I had everything calmed down."

"You mean they don't know you hired Blake and Hardwick to try and down Abe Meade yesterday morning and they killed his cousin by mistake?" demanded Trench. "That they tried to get Morton at your orders last night?"

"That's just what we've been waiting to hear," said the Dark Knight, appearing suddenly and covering the two men with his guns. "Thanks for pinning the evidence on your partner, Trench."

Faro Thorpe uttered a vicious curse. In a sudden rage his fist shot out, caught Sam Trench squarely on the jaw and knocked the hotel man back against the wall of the hall.

"That will teach you to spoil everything!" Thorpe roared. "You brainless fool!"

He stepped into the living room, ignoring the black-clad outlaw as he passed him. Then abruptly Thorpe's .38's were in his hands. He fired and Maxwell went down, wounded in the shoulder.

"Watch Trench, out in the hall, Anderson," snapped the Dark Knight. "Don't let him get away."

The red-headed young rancher dashed out into the hall as the Dark Knight stepped into the room. Thorpe fired at the masked man, his bullet missing by inches. Abe Meade lunged at the gambler with the intention of knocking the guns out of his hands. Thorpe raised one gun in a lightning move and brought the barrel down on the old hellion's head in a vicious blow. Meade shuddered and, still clawing blindly at his smaller assailant, crashed to the floor like a felled oak tree.

The Dark Knight dodged out of the way of a possible second bullet to snap a shot at Thorpe, but it was Maxwell who got in his way. Getting up from the floor, the mine manager lunged across the room at Thorpe like a maniac. The Dark Knight was forced to hold his fire.

Leaping backward out of the charging Maxwell's way. Thorpe fired again, and missed in his frantic haste. Alarmed, Thorpe stepped back again, and his leg struck against the window sill just as Maxwell reached him. Lunging into the gambler, Maxwell finished the job of knocking Thorpe off-balance.

Clawing frantically at the sides of the open window, unable to clutch them because of the guns in his hands, Thorpe toppled backward out of the opening. He screamed hoarsely once before he crashed to the sidewalk below.

The fight was over—ended. So were Thorpe's ambitions.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

HENRY MAXWELL stood there for a moment staring stupidly out of the window. Then he turned around to make an apologetic gesture to the Dark Knight and fell forward in a dead faint.

"What—what happened?" demanded Belle, as she and Sally and Mary Burke appeared in the doorway. "We heard shooting and came over here—oh——"

Then, suddenly it seemed to the Dark Knight, the room was overflowing with women. Belle flung herself down beside Maxwell.

"Oh, Henry, Henry," she sobbed. "You must believe I didn't really want Faro or the gold mine. I was only pretending. I—I hoped if he thought I was on his side it would give me more chance to protect you all."

"I know, Belle," said Maxwell as he regained consciousness. "It's all right, darling. Everything is all right now."

Mary Burke was down on the floor, cradling Abe Mcade's battered head in her lap. Sally was laughing and crying hysterically in Anderson's arms as the redhead stood at the door.

The Dark Knight stepped out into the hall. Then he paused and stood staring as Eagle Wing appeared at the head of a strange procession that had just come up the stairs. Following the Indian boy were Marshal Quigley, Eben Snodgrass and Limpy Logan. Behind Logan came two grim-faced Texas cowboys, dragging a frightened and scratched and torn Sam Trench between them.

"Caught this hombre trying to sneak downstairs," said one of the cowboys. "So we brung him back."

"Senor!" exclaimed Eagle Wing delightedly, as he stared at the Dark Knight, "You are all right?"

"Well I wouldn't have been if there'd been one more woman," stated the Dark Knight wryly.

"Holy Moses!" exclaimed the little undertaker in distress. "There are corpses and unconscious men all over the place

around here. I better get Doc Stamms. I wish that Morton feller would come back. I'd hire him after all."

"Is Abe Meade—dead?" demanded Limpy Logan anxiously of the Dark Knight as the cook stared into the room and saw his boss lying on the floor. "Gabe! Bronc! Get that polecat Trench ready to string up."

"Hold on, men," said the Dark Knight. "Your boss is all right. He was just knocked unconscious."

"He's coming out of it now," said Mary as she sat with the old man's head in her lap.

"Henry's doing all right, too," said Belle. "He just got shot in the fleshy part of the shoulder. No bones broken, I'm sure."

• "Or hearts, either," said Maxwell, smiling up at her. "I'm sure glad you were lying to Thorpe."

"How did you happen to get here?" the Dark Knight asked the cook of the Old Anchor.

"We come ahellin' to town," explained Limpy, "as soon as I could round up Bronc and Gabe. They was just finishing getting some mules out of some quicksand. When we got here we learned this skunk Sam Trench had stirred up a lynch mob against Abe and the Dark Knight. They had this place surrounded, but we broke it up sort of."

"With my help," added Marshal Quigley. "Where is Faro Thorpe?"

"You just missed him, lawman," said the Dark Knight dryly. "He fell out the window."

Promptly Quigley and Gabe Harper ran out to investigate. Sally and John Anderson were now standing side by side, holding hands and looking blissful.

"You must save my life, Dark Knight," exclaimed Trench, looking pleadingly at the masked man. "These people will lynch me if you don't protect me."

"Why should I even stir a finger to protect you, Trench?" said the Dark Knight. "Didn't you turn that mob that was outside against Abe Meade and me? Haven't you been trying to rouse the town against Meade every chance you got?"

"Yes, yes, I'll admit everything," babbled Trench nervously. "But I had to do it all. It was at Faro Thorpe's orders. He insisted we try to get rid of Meade in every possible way so we could get the gold mine."

The Dark Knight spied some papers on the floor near the window through which Thorpe had fallen to the ground. The black-clad man walked over and picked up the papers and glanced at them.

"Here's the deed to the Old Anchor and the quitclaim," said the Dark Knight. "Anderson, I figure you were cheated out of this agreement by Thorpe." He handed it to the young rancher. "You'd best take it and destroy it. You won't want to buy the Old Anchor back—now that you seem to be planning on marrying into it."

"That's sure a wonderful idea," said Anderson. "If Sally's willing?"

"Sally's willing," said that young lady. "After she receives a more romantic proposal at a better time and place."

"Good," said Anderson. "You're plumb right, about the deed, Dark Knight. I'll tear it up."

"Thanks, Johnny," said Abe Meade, sitting up. "Always did think it would be nice if you and me were good friends like I used to be with your Dad as I said before." He grinned. "Sides I'm getting old and cranky and need a young man to watch out for my womenfolks."

"With that deed out of the way, it will make you free to deal with Maxwell and sell him a strip of land for his right-of-way," went on the Dark Knight. "As for you, Maxwell, in view of the fact that Meade is trying to raise money to help the Burke family, you might be a little more generous in your terms."

"You bet I will," said Maxwell weakly. "As soon as I get on my feet, I'll meet you half way, Abe. So that's the reason you wouldn't sell the company a strip through the Old Anchor? You were holding it intact in strict accord with your agreement with Johnny's father. But if you needed money to help the Burkes, why didn't you start developing your gold mine?"

Abe Meade looked around the group as he got to his feet. He had the appearance of a patriarch with his swathed head, bandaged in strips torn from Mary Burke's underskirt. There was a twinkle in his gimlet eyes as he patted the widow's thin hands.

"I don't reckon we'll need money to send you to Colorado for your health, Mary," he said. "New Mexico's high and dry enough to make you well. And I got a sun-scorcher of a

ranch up near the desert in the Old Anchor where you can bake good."

"Thank you, Cousin Abe," said Mary, as the old man helped her to her feet. "We'll do any thing you say."

"But you won't leave for the ranch until morning," said Belle. "I insist you have a good rest first, Mary."

"Why—" Meade started to protest, then as he caught Belle's glance. "Why certainly, you're plumb right, Belle."

Just at that moment Marshal Quigley entered the room with an important air.

"Yes," he said, tugging at his sagging moustache. "Thorpe's dead. He broke his neck." The peace officer looked sternly at those around him. "Now just what is all this ruction?" I can't allow such wholesale slaughter going on in my town."

"It's all settled, Marshal," said the Dark Knight.

"Not until I learn the right of things, it isn't," said the marshal firmly.

"There you go again, Matt," said Anderson impatiently. "Always ready to take command after the battle is over. Like the Dark Knight said, everything is settled."

"All but one thing," said Abe Meade. "I guess there ain't no need to keep it a secret any longer. There ain't any gold mine, and there never was."

"What?" demanded Maxwell, getting to his feet.

Everyone in the room including the Dark Knight and Eagle Wing stared blankly at the old hellion, too dumbfounded to speak.

"That's right," said Meade. "There ain't any gold mine. I just filed a bogus claim to keep the ranch intact and make Maxwell come through with a decent deal."

"And Faro Thorpe turned crooked and instigated murder because of a stacked deck," said Belle. "This is one last time he overplayed a hand."

"No gold mine!" exclaimed Sam Trench. "And now my whole life is ruined because an old man lied."

"You've been doing some pretty good lying yourself, Trench," said the Dark Knight coldly.

"That's right," said Meade. "Quigley, I want Sam Trench placed under arrest on a charge of inciting murder."

"Inciting murder!" exclaimed the hotel keeper in horror. "But I didn't do any such thing."

"If stirring up a mob and trying to get them to lynch me isn't some sort of attempt at murder I do 't know what is!" roared the old rancher. Abe Meade was himself again. "Are you going to do like I say, Marshal?"

"Yes, sir," said Quigley meekly. "You're under arrest, Trench. I'm the law in this town and I'm sure glad I'm putting somebody in jail at last."

"I guess that's our signal to be travelling, Wing," said the Dark Knight. "We are through here."

"Si, Senor," said Eagle Wing. "We go."

The Navajo boy headed for the hall. Over swift protests the man in the mask and black cloak stepped to the door. He waved farewell from the threshold, and then, closely followed by his Indian companion he made for the stairs and the untrammelled range.

"Well, I got to work all night," complained Mr. Snodgrass in sad accents. "You say there's two more corpses at the back door, Matt? You wouldn't want a temporary job, would you, after you put your prisoner in jail?"

"Nope," replied Marshal Quigley firmly. "I got me a job looking for that Morton feller."

"Reckon my men wouldn't mind helping you getting the bodies lugged to your place, Eben," said Meade. "How about it, boys?"

"All right with me," said Limpy Logan and the two Texas cowboys nodded in agreement. "Let's get working, Snodgrass."

An hour later the stout little undertaker breathed a mournful sigh of relief. With the help of Abe Meade's three men they had collected the bodies of Faro Thorpe, Joe Blake, and various other men who had been killed during the course of the wild evening in Sand Wells. and brought them to the undertaking establishment.

Now Limpy Logan, and Bronc and Gabe had left. Snodgrass was just about to put out the oil lamps and call it a night when there was a soft knock on the front door of the office. The little man went to the door and peered at the tall figure standing in the shadows.

"Morton," exclaimed Snodgrass. "What do you want?" "Where you been doing all the excitement tonight?"

"Keeping out of sight," said Morton, with far more truth

in his words that the undertaker realized. "Quigley still anxious to put me in jail?"

"Talks like it will always be his life-long ambition," said Snodgrass. "But what do you want, Morton? You didn't come to pay your respects to all the deceased I got stored away here."

"No," said Morton. "I remembered something you told me the first time I talked to you, so I came to ask you to do me a favour."

"What's that?" asked the stout little man in surprise.

"You said you worked in the barber shop on Saturday afternoons," said Morton. "And I need a haircut plumb bad."

"Noticed that," said Snodgrass. "Wondered why you didn't do something about it—then I realised you been right busy since you were in town. All right, Morton. Sit in that chair over there, and I'll give you a haircut."

Morton did as he was told, and the undertaker got his barber tools and gave the big stranger one of the best haircuts he'd ever had. What was more amazing, Snodgrass did it swiftly and in silence.

"That sure feels and looks grand," said Morton, glancing into a mirror on the wall when the job was finished. "How much do I owe you, Eben?"

"Nothing, call it a farewell present," said the stout little man sadly. "Don't reckon you'll stay around town much longer now there's nothing for you to be nose about."

"You're right," said Morton. "If I don't see you again, give Marshal Quigley my regards. And thanks."

The two men shook hands, then Snodgrass went with Morton to the front entrance of the undertaking establishment. The little man opened the door and peered out into the darkness of the hours just before dawn.

"Nobody in sight," he said. "It's safe for you to leave now. Funny thing—that Dark Knight feller sure needed a haircut, too."

"Meaning what?" demanded Morton tensely.

"That it's something only a barber would notice," said Eben Snodgrass in his sad high voice. "And which an undertaker won't ever mention or even remember again."

"Thanks, Eben," said Morton as he stepped out into the night. "Thanks for everything!"

"You're welcome," came in the high voice and then the door closed behind Morton.

He headed on along the street in the direction of the outskirts of the town where he had left Eagle Wing waiting with Ebony and the Indian boy's grey horse while Morton went to see if the undertaker would give him a haircut.

Instantly Morton's hands flashed to his guns as a tall, lean figure loomed out of the shadows near the gate to Snodgrass' side yard. It was only quick recognizing of the other man that prevented Morton's Colts from coming up roaring. If Marshal Quigley had realized how close to death he was at that instant he would have had the shudders for the rest of his life.

"Morton!" he said. "First time I ever seen you was here at Snodgrass' place so I figured you might show up here again. And I was right."

"So you were, Marshal," said Morton. "Now you have found me what are you going to do about it?"

"Why, hold you for questioning," said Quigley.

"Questioning about what?" demanded Morton. "I understand all the trouble has been settled. Everybody knows that Faro Thorpe hired Joe Blake and Mike Hardwick to drygulch Abe Meade. They made a mistake and killed Stanley Burke instead."

"Thorpe hired, them?" said the marshal in amazement. "Why doesn't somebody tell me these things?" He tugged at his drooping moustache. "Why did Thorpe want to have Meade drygulched?"

"So Thorpe could take over Meade's gold mine, only there really wasn't any gold mine at all," said Morton. "Get Meade or Johnny Anderson to explain it all to you, Marshal. I haven't got time."

"But there must be some reason I should stick you in jail and hold you for questioning," said Quigley, who did not appear to be at his brightest. "Ain't that so, Morton?"

"No," said Morton firmly, jabbing the barrel of his right-hand gun into the peace officer's chest after a draw so fast Quigley had not even seen it. "You bother me, Marshal. Your ears worry me."

"What's wrong with my ears?" demanded Quigley.

"Nothing," said Morton. "I just wondered what holds them up since there's nothing between them."

"All right, Morton," said Quigley, and suddenly there was authority in his voice, and he sounded as if he knew exactly what he was talking about. "Put your gun away. I haven't really been hunting you to stick you in jail. It's something personal."

"Personal?" said Morton, puzzled as he dropped his gun back into the holster. "What do you mean?"

"This!" Quigley's arm shot out and a hard fist landed against Morton's jaw.

Morton reeled back, but he recovered quick, ready to fight. To his amazement the marshal just stood there, his arms hanging at his sides.

"I owed you a sock on the jaw for the one you gave me, Steve," he said in a friendly tone. "Now we're even." He shook his head sadly. "I'm just not the man you are, Morton. You knocked me cold with one blow and I couldn't do it to you."

"You did well enough, Matt," said Morton. "Remember when I said you surprised me? Well, you still do. But I'll be leaving now."

"Go ahead," said Quigley. "I'm not stopping you." He started walking in the direction of the jail, then glanced back over his shoulder. "And luck if I don't see you around."

"Thanks," called Morton. "Same to you, Matt."

Soon both men had disappeared as they walked in opposite directions along the deserted street—and not once had outlaw or lawman looked back a second time. There was no need to be wary when you knew you could trust the man behind you . . .

With the coming of another dawn the Dark Knight and his faithful Navajo companion broke camp. There was no longer any reason for them to linger in this part of New Mexico. Their work was done here, and there were other places throughout the vast expanses of the rangeland where they might be needed.

"This town of Sand Wells was very dull," said Eagle Wing as he adjusted the packs on the pinto and the roan. He and the Dark Knight were riding the great stallion and the grey. "Nothing ever happens there."

"Nothing ever happens?" exclaimed the Dark Knight,

recalling the hectic night he had just been through. "Are you plumb loco, Wing?"

"No," said the Indian boy. "I just mean, nothing happened to Eagle Wing—that's why I found town dull. Nobody tried to shoot me or stab me or even give me a good swift kick. Very unexciting."

"So that's what has been worrying you," said the Dark Knight with a laugh. "Maybe this will help."

He aimed a kick at Eagle Wing that was all in fun. The kick never connected for the Navajo leaped nimbly out of the way.

"That's enough, Senor," he said. "I feel much better now. Everything is ready to go. We start?"

"All right, Wing," said the Dark Knight going to Ebony and swinging into the saddle. "Let's go."

As the sun rose higher they had left Sand Wells, the PDQ and the Old Anchor far behind them, and were travelling so they skirted but did not have to cross Dutchman's Desert.

"Which way now, Wing?" demanded the Dark Knight finally. "Towards Albuquerque, or Santa Fe? Down in the Gila River region or toward Mescalero Valley?"

"What does it matter, Senor?" said Eagle Wing. "No use trying to say if we go in this direction or another that we will be safe from trouble or danger. Never do we have to seek them, they are always waiting for us along the trails."

"That's right, Wing," said the Dark Knight. "And we would be as disappointed as a young fellow when his best girl doesn't show up if we couldn't keep our date with trouble and danger."

"Si, Senor," said the Navajo boy, his dark eyes gleaming. "You are so right."

They rode on, two riders and four horses, that gradually seemed to grow smaller and smaller in the heat haze before the strange little cavalcade vanished in the distance.

